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BART needs to get on board the Wi-Fi express

James Temple, Chronicle Columnist
Sunday, August 7, 2011

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Audrey Whitmeyer-Weathers / The Chronicle

BART passengers have a difficult time securing a good Wi-Fi signal for very long in San Francisco.

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BART is the largest regional transit system in the undisputed center of the technology universe, but good luck getting online if you're a commuter.

Nearly 2 1/2 years after BART struck a deal with an Internet provider - and at least seven months after the service was supposed to be available systemwide - it's still difficult to secure a Wi-Fi signal long enough to log on.

When the deal was first announced, WiFi Rail of Sacramento said the high-speed service would be available throughout the system by the end of 2010. So we decided it was high time to check in.

As it stands, there is Wi-Fi coverage from the Civic Center Station in San Francisco to Lake Merritt and 19th Street stations in Oakland. But the signal comes and goes so quickly on a moving train that there's rarely time to key in the log-in and password before it's lost. And maddeningly, you must enter that information each and every time you start a new session.

Cooper Lee, chief executive of the company, said in an

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e-mail that the rollout has been delayed due to several modifications of the plan over the past 18 months.

"Instead of deploying a network which is solely dedicated to Wi-Fi Internet access for consumers, WiFi Rail and BART jointly decided to increase the scope and capacity of the network installation to include features for security, operations and maintenance," he wrote.

Here's a helpful hint if you desperately need to connect: Look for the cars with a gray fin-shaped antenna on the roof, usually near the front or rear. You need to be in one of those to nab a quality signal underground, Lee said. There are about 20 of these cars in the system, but that number should leap to 50 before fall.

If all goes well, by September WiFi Rail hopes to be done with Phase 2 - full implementation from San Francisco to Oakland, including through the Transbay Tube.

The unreliable quality of the service today is clearly reflected in the usage numbers: Of the roughly 350,000 average weekday BART riders, only about 1,500 are using the network.

The good news is that, for now, the service remains free. Once the system is complete, the company originally said it would charge \$6 for two hours of use, \$9 per day, \$30 a month or \$300 a year. That's awfully steep for a service most people will use less than an hour a workday, but there will also be a free option for those willing to sit through some 30-second ads.

WiFi Rail is covering the service's construction and operating costs, and BART will eventually get a share of the revenue.

Why Wi-Fi matters: At least BART is trying to implement Wi-Fi.

San Francisco's Muni, the area's most used transit system, doesn't have any such service. It is looking at broader technical upgrades that could include Internet access, spokesman Paul Rose said.

Caltrain, which delivers riders into the heart of Silicon Valley, conducted Wi-Fi feasibility tests a few years ago but has no plans of moving forward with service due to funding constraints, spokeswoman Christine Dunn said.

Other systems that aren't providing Internet service also plead poverty.

But it can be done, at least in limited ways. Free Wi-Fi is available on some AC Transit routes between San Francisco, the East Bay and the Peninsula; on the Highway 17 Express line between Santa Cruz and San Jose; and, as of last month, on the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's light-rail system.

Similar services have been implemented on transit systems in dozens of cities across the nation, including Portland, Ore., Seattle, Salt Lake City and Cincinnati, most often for free (ahem, BART).

Here's the thing: This matters.

In today's world, Internet access isn't just a nice transit amenity, like leather seats. As expensive as it is, it's a relatively cheap public lever that pays economic and environmental dividends.

If people could spend the commute time getting work done online it would potentially

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If people could spend the commute time getting work done online it would potentially mean fewer cars on the road, which would reduce the region's carbon footprint while shoring up the finances of our shaky transit systems, transit experts say.

It would also increase worker responsiveness and productivity, which is precisely why company shuttles that cart Apple and Google workers from San Francisco to the valley supply Internet access. It could potentially cut down the workday for employees as well, since otherwise lost time becomes productive time.

The research isn't deep in this field, but a 2007 study conducted for the Illinois Department of Transportation concluded that providing high-speed Internet on transit systems "could indeed have positive impacts on traffic congestion, traffic safety, the economy, and other aspects of ... quality of life."

"It's absolutely a no-brainer, it has to be done," said Ramavarapu Sreenivas, associate head for graduate studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who wrote the study.

It seems especially obvious in the Bay Area, where so many jobs rely on constant Internet access.

The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's customer surveys consistently find it's the most requested feature and that ridership increases when it's implemented.

"Being in the center of Silicon Valley, it was an easy decision," said Brandi Childress, a spokeswoman for agency. "It was low-hanging fruit."

Dot-commentary runs Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Follow @jtemple on Twitter or e-mail jtemple@sfchronicle.com.

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Lrenturn 6:42 PM on August 6, 2011

How about we fix the aging trains now and worry about wi-fi at a later time.

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BBnet3000 10:45 AM on August 7, 2011

Wifi would be fine after we make the trains quiet enough to think straight.

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daveintokyo 6:37 AM on August 8, 2011

Well, I use my laptop on the trains here in Tokyo all the time. I have a 3G dongle that works well above ground. Last time I was in SF I had a meeting out in Pleasanton so I took BART (big mistake - it cost me \$15 to get a taxi from Pleasanton BART to the office). Riding along with my big, expensive laptop on my lap I started thinking to myself - "Am I being an idiot sitting here on BART, going through Oakland, with \$3K of computer sitting out in the open?"

I sure as hell wouldn't pull out my laptop on MUNI - not that there's enough room in the seats to work anyway and the constant shuddering of the bus would drive you nuts in a minute.

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Delay in BART's Wi-Fi plan



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