



Sandpoint telecom facility broadening role as key community resource

Barely 18 months old, the Bonner County Teleconferencing Center (BCTC) already provides a broad range of services. In 2003, new college-level courses, privately funded classes for troubled teens, and other curricula are adding to the center's core academic, economic, and governmental services.

A culmination of sustained efforts by its sponsoring coalition—State Sen. Shawn Keough, the University of Idaho, the City of Sandpoint, Bonner County, and the Bonner Education Technical Alliance (BETA)—the center opened its doors in mid-August of 2001, just in time to begin holding fall semester classes. Since then, BCTC has been providing “almost-live” links between the region's businesspeople, professionals, students, and citizens and other areas of Idaho and the U.S.

Teleconferencing now allows northern Idaho to better compete for new and relocating business, as well as creating opportunities for existing ones. “It's the next-best thing to being there in person,” says Jim Czirr, executive vice president of the business development for Pro-Pharmaceuticals. “Using the center can put me right in the boardroom of a company; it allows face-to-face contact, live presentations—it's much more personal than a voice at the other end of a telephone.” Czirr also cites productivity gains and reduced business expenses. “I'm more productive working from my desk versus having to spend days traveling, waiting in airports, and sitting in hotel rooms without access to the office facilities I normally use.”

BCTC is helping state legislators stay in touch with constituents and has facilitated town meetings, hearings, a health forum,



Photo by Kristan Peacock

The UI Extension office in Bonner County was retrofitted with telecom equipment and new signage in mid-2001.

and “attendance” at the Boise legislative session. Sandpoint's mayor has used the facility to hold remote meetings, as have county commissioners. Participatory democracy is increasing as financial barriers—primarily travel costs—are being removed. The center's ongoing performance assessment program invites users to complete a survey estimating their expense reductions as well as the overall quality of services provided.

For residents of remote areas like Boundary and Bonner counties, a facility like the Bonner County Teleconferencing Center provides something even more significant than saving money: access to education.

“The center has increased options for people needing to take classes,” says Shelly Brooks, technology coordinator for West Bonner County School District. Brooks is taking continuing education classes for renewal of her administrative credentials and courses she needs to earn her Ph.D. “It cuts down on travel to Moscow, Coeur d'Alene, or Spokane,” Brooks states, adding that, “Availability has been a prob-

lem, too. Classes have size limits of 20 or 25 and there are usually waiting lists to get in.”

For Brooks and other students in northern Idaho, BCTC provides opportunities for learning in a comfortable, locally accessible and modern facility. “The technology at our center works really well,” she says. “It's well managed and coordinated.” Brooks hopes such facilities continue to proliferate. “Teleconferencing is a great opportunity for rural north Idaho to make connections throughout the state. [People in] some areas don't realize how beneficial and easy it can be.”

Credit for such praise goes in part to BCTC site manager Kristan Peacock. In addition to maintaining and scheduling the facility, Peacock conducts needs assessments to help plan future course offerings. This winter she worked with regional school personnel to discover their needs for summer and fall sessions. “The best way to do that is to go out there to a staff meeting and ask [faculty] what they need,” says Peacock. “Hopefully we can set up a steady stream of master's degree classes for the educators here in the area.”

The BETA group's vision in bringing the facility to northern Idaho was to level the playing field for the area by reducing impacts created by its remote location. Carol Curtis, president of Sandpoint Computers and Bonner County's information systems director, has been affiliated with the teleconferencing center since its inception. “We hope that within three to five years,” she says, “a student coming out of our public schools could successfully complete a degree program without ever leaving Bonner County.”