

BUSINESS

Good, better, Bester

TINY TELCO BEATS BIG BOYS WITH DOWNTOWN INTERNET SERVICE 100 TIMES FASTER THAN BELL'S GIGABIT FIBE

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Les Bester runs a little homemade telecommunications company called Les.net laying his own cables and providing telephone services to a few thousand customers and super-high-speed Internet to about 100 in the city.

There was a bit of irony percolating below the surface at the splashy Bell MTS announcement this week about super-fast broadband coming to Innovation Alley.

The fact is a number of downtown businesses, including many right there on Innovation Alley, are already getting very high-speed Internet service — even faster than what George Cope, CEO of Bell Canada, promised it will be providing at the well-attended Innovation Alley block party Tuesday.

But they're not getting it from MTS or Shaw, the two dominant Internet service providers in Manitoba.

They are getting it from a small Winnipeg company called Les.net.

The brainchild of Les Bester, Les.net has been providing phone service to more than 2,000 Manitoba customers for several years.

More recently, his tiny do-it-yourself telco has become the Winnipeg connection for Hurricane Electric, one of the largest global Internet backbone wholesale sellers.

Bester has personally laid fibre-optic cables for Les.net connecting to about 30 buildings in downtown Winnipeg. One Winnipeg businessperson who knows him said, "Bester is the pitcher, first baseman and plays centre field" — and the company now has close to 100 customers with high-speed Internet service of up to 100 gigabites. Bell's Gigabit Fibe Internet service is one gigabit.

Because of the 100-year-old-plus infrastructure in the area and maybe because of its distance from the Portage and Main office towers, the big telcos have not yet built up their network infrastructure there.

But Bester can do it himself.

"It can be a problem, though, because sometimes you go down the manhole, and the conduits into the building have been filled in with concrete or have just deteriorated over time," he said.

"But I deliver multiple-gigabit service to about a dozen customers in the area, some with service of 10 to 20 gigabites," Bester said, "These are speeds and infrastructure that just does not exist."

He also can do it at a fraction of the cost of the high-overhead national players.

Jeff Ryzner, the CEO of North Forge Technology Exchange, the economic development group marshalling the Innovation Alley activities, essentially indicated Les.net has been a lifesaver for them.

"His service is incredible," Ryzner said. "He is always going to be one of the service providers for Innovation Alley."

Bester did the installation and was providing the service to North Forge for free.

"I want to support the tech startups," he said. "You need real Internet for Internet-based companies."

(Les.net's contributions to Innovation Alley were not made evident at the block party last week, and Bester, feeling snubbed amid the hoopla of the Bell MTS announcement, temporarily pulled the plug on his Innovation Alley clients. "At the end of the day, I was not going to be the secret mistress providing awesome service when someone else is putting banners on everything," he said. Ryzner and North Forge board members subsequently apologized for the oversight, and Bester restored service this week.)

Although MTS has been a major supporter of Innovation Alley and the tech startup community, it has not yet built the network infrastructure that can support the kind of digital enterprises that are forming in that part of the west Exchange District. Tuesday's announcement was that Innovation Alley would basically be the first place Bell MTS starts digging when Bell's acquisition of MTS closes, likely early next year.

But before Les.net's arrival a few months ago after fully wiring 321 McDermot Ave., one of the co-location sites for North Forge, Internet service was very spotty.

One entrepreneur, who requested his name not be used, said, "I was on the verge of needing to take a stress leave because the Internet service was so bad. It was that big an issue. Then Les.net came in, and service was much better."

It's a scenario echoed by several others who've been through a few cycles of poor service. Dustin Refvik, one of the original leaders behind RampUp weekend events and a much sought-after product development expert among the tech start-ups, said before Les.net's service was installed, Internet speeds may have driven some would-be entrepreneurs away from Innovation Alley.

Doug Darling, executive producer at Tripwire Media Group, a digital video-production company a block away on McDermot Avenue, is a recent convert to the Les.net network.

He said a New York customer who required very prompt service told Tripwire it wasn't working out because it was taking too long to send and receive high-resolution video files, more than an hour each way.

"Our IT consultant introduced us to Les.net, and now we can get high-resolution video files to the client in one to two minutes," said Darling. "It takes longer for the site to render it out for him than it takes to upload the file. It is invaluable how it has helped our workflow."

Darling said when he ran speed-test analytics that measures upload and download speeds, "We broke the needle."

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