

NEWS

'Tins link us up with the world'

'Cantenna' takes rural community into modern age

SYDNEY MASINGA

THE humble tin can has changed the lives of a rural community.

The cans have been converted into antennas which have allowed a small rural Aids hospice and a clinic, in the Peebles Valley just outside White River in Mpumalanga, to cut their monthly phone bills from R3 000 to zero.

Local villagers who have computers can also access the internet free of charge using the "cantenna".

The Merake Institute is in charge of the technical development of the Peebles Valley Project. It forms part of its Community Owned Information Network initiative.

The institute aims to develop poor areas through training, research and information and communications technology.

In Peebles, the clinic and the hospice are kilometres apart. Doctors were finding it difficult to contact the nurses at the hospice because there were no landline telephones and no cellphone coverage.

It would also have cost too much to install cabling for telephones. The only way to go was wireless.

So in 2005, the institute and the community of Peebles started to turn metal cans, like coffee tins, into antennas.

A bicycle spoke was soldered to a special connector which could receive signals from similar antennas up to 5km away.

The antennas were then connected to a WiFi card plugged into a computer. A

small wireless router was placed in a weatherproof casing on a pole to which several community members could connect to form a community



CAN DO . . . A 'cantenna' goes up in the Peebles Valley in Mpumalanga

Picture: Merake Institute

mesh.

The technology allows the wireless installations to automatically configure themselves to find the optimal routes through the network. Very little configuration is needed to set them up.

"This means everyone can access the network and make voice over IP calls (VoIP), surf the Net and send emails," says research leader at Merake, David Johnson.

He says the challenge is to adapt these broadband networks to provide the same low-cost solutions to communities that are not literate in information technology. We want the rural communities and the municipality to be involved in the project and share the benefits.

"We want them to share ownership of their own communications network," he says.

Johnson says the project is cheaper to install than other communications infrastructure. It also offers more competitive call rates because it is using VoIP.

"As part of the initiative, the communities around Peebles Valley were taught how to assemble and install the cantennas.

"Our initial focus with this project was to improve the communications between doctors, nurses and patients. We were doing that by connecting the clinics and Aids centres first," he adds.

Johnson says the project is being rolled out to individual households and community organisations. - African Eye News Service



IN WITH THE NEW . . . Nelson M

Furore

DAN DHLAMINI

WHILE opposition parties are occupied with a legal battle over Potchefstroom's name change, the council is working at breakneck speed to change street names.

This week municipal workers started implementing the council's 2006 resolution to change street names on Tom Street, which leads to Die Buur suburb regarded as an Afrikaner suburb, near the North West Univer