

A ‘Tireless’ Discussion

How can wireless be used in multifamily housing? Let’s count the ways.

By Bryan Rader / *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

I am thinking of a word that starts with a w. It’s quickly becoming one of the most important terms for those concerned with broadband in multifamily housing. No, it’s not “winning,” a word Charlie Sheen made notorious several years ago. And it’s not “wiki,” a term for collaborative applications. Both good guesses! So, which w word could it be?

Well, here’s a hint. It rhymes with “tireless.”

That’s right! It’s “wireless,” the most popular word today among property owners, developers, providers and vendors. And to each of them, it means something different.

I often hear people ask in meetings, “Isn’t everything going wireless these days? Will we even need TV outlets or data ports in our apartment units in the future?”

Then others chime in with responses such as, “Wireless is only a way to connect devices to a gateway box. It’s what consumers use to stream content to a tablet.”

That’s followed by, “Well, actually, wireless is used to connect buildings in close proximity to one another where there isn’t access to good fiber.”

“Maybe,” says another person in this typical discussion, “but I wouldn’t consider wireless for anything more than a common-area Wi-Fi hot spot.”

“Why not?” asks a student housing developer. “Wireless is the perfect network for mobile young students.”

“Hmm,” says the big boss at the head of the conference table. “When I think of wireless, I think about my smartphone. That’s the only wireless that matters to me.”

I believe all these comments are correct at some level in explaining what “wireless” means to the MDU industry.

USES FOR WIRELESS

Some of my Wi-Fi provider friends talk about using wireless as a canopy product in amenity areas such as fitness centers, courtyards, swimming pools and lobbies. One recently told me, “We use Wi-Fi as a technology amenity that gives apartment residents an always-on, secure and easy-to-use platform. Maybe not the fastest but certainly the most convenient.”

Other service providers see wireless as a bigger part of their delivery program. “Accessing a network that allows you to seamlessly stream a movie from anywhere on the property with any authenticated device is a very important feature,” they tell me. Vendors such as Ruckus, Ubiquiti, Cambium

Networks and Meraki all have solutions for these networks, and they no longer are limited by speeds. In student housing, using such a solution is key.

Some large cable companies are using wireless in a different way. They see it as the connection between a gateway box and consumer devices for streaming content on their TV Everywhere platforms. This setup uses wireless within the unit rather than throughout the community (although this is changing, too).

Wireless can also be used to connect buildings. Many providers use wireless to send excess bandwidth from one high-rise building to another. This can be an effective way for an operator to efficiently utilize its bandwidth and streamline costs. It’s true that this causes some degradation of service quality when too many buildings share too little bandwidth. But if done properly, this can be a great way to leverage bandwidth costs.

Mimosa Networks, a startup company, has developed proprietary solutions of this kind for the MDU market. According to Mimosa, “Our wireless technology picks up where fiber leaves off.” And it’s not the only one focusing on this area.

Wireless can also refer to 4G LTE from companies such as Verizon and AT&T, which are increasingly handling more mobile video. In fact, Verizon plans to launch a new mobile TV product later this year, which could lead to another wireless data plan for resident devices such as iPads. This will pose problems for property owners that have weak cell phone signals in and around their communities.

Finally, there is wireless backhaul, DAS for wireless distribution of bandwidth around communities, and soon the Internet of Things, which will likely be based on wireless technologies.

All these solutions use wireless in some fashion – which is why there’s so much confusion about the w word. But if operators want to wiki a successful plan for winning, they must be thinking about wireless as a core part of their programs. ❖

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