Community downloads its internet access issues
        Comments will help develop an action plan

By Malcolm Griffes

The YourSpace meeting room at TwispWorks was abuzz during a public meeting hosted by the valley's Broadband Action Team (BAT) on Feb. 18, in an effort to compile community concerns about internet access that will be part of a new study.

Fast and reliable internet is not readily available in parts of the Methow Valley, where internet access can be frustratingly slow or even unresponsive. "It goes from bad to unusable," said one community member at the meeting.

"There are family rifts over [the poor access], because I won't give my family the wi-fi password when they come to visit," said another attendee. A common complaint: Adding more users to a network slows down already-sluggish broadband speeds.

Apart from causing familial disharmony, limited access to reliable broadband has negative impacts that range from affecting those who work from home, to compromising communications during emergencies such as the wildfires in 2014 – which, in part, prompted the creation of BAT, according to Twisp Mayor Soo Ing-Moody, who attended the meeting.

The public meeting was the first step in a year-long study being conducted by consulting firm Tilson Technology Management Inc., a Maine-based telecommunications company that was hired through a $66,667 grant, secured by the Twisp Public Development Authority and provided by Washington state in conjunction with the Okanogan County Commissioners Office and the Twisp Public Development Authority (PDA). Washington state's Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB) provided $50,000, and the County Commissioners' Office and the Twisp PDA provided the other $16,667 collectively.

Chris Campbell, principal consultant with Tilson Technology, started the meeting by asking to hear from the 32 attendees. The meeting then turned into a group brainstorming session with community members sharing their issues, concerns and potential solutions.

Six issues

The responses were directed at six specific issues the Methow Valley faces in dealing with its current broadband access: availability, affordability, choice, support for businesses and employers, support for public services, and speed and performance. The group broke up into small teams and got to work compiling issues relating to the six categories, and the impacts they have on the valley.

None of the groups had trouble filling the provided pages of butcher paper with the caused and effects of poor internet connectivity, which was good news for the goal of the meeting: to flesh out the consultants' understanding of the perceived broadband needs and gaps in the Methow Valley.

Tilson Technology will be delivering a recommended action plan to BAT, targeted for September 2020. The plan's purpose will be to make recommendations for how to increase the accessibility, reliability, and quality of broadband access in unserved and underserved areas of the Methow Valley, according to Campbell.

Following the community meeting, Tilson Technology's representative spent the next day meeting with three of the main internet providers in the Methow: Methownet, CenturyLink and NCI Datacom, as well as Okanogan County Electric Co-op.

Tilson Technology's next step to produce a stakeholder report, according to Don Linnertz, executive director at TwispWorks and member of BAT. "The interviews with the internet providers where to establish a mapping of our current infrastructure. From that [Tilson Technologies] will better understand where the demand is, and what solution will have the biggest impact for the most people," said Linnertz.