

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

Santa Cruz County in a black hole amid phone, Internet outage

By J.M. BROWN

Posted: 04/10/2009 08:17:43 AM PDT

SANTA CRUZ -- Santa Cruz County woke up to a rude reminder Thursday of just how reliant society has become on the Internet, cell phones and even less modern technology, like hard phone lines.

A large portion of the South Bay and adjacent coastal region -- including most of Santa Cruz, San Benito and southern Santa Clara counties -- were transformed into a virtual black hole after vandals severed fiber optic cables underground. Authorities did not immediately identify suspects in the overnight vandalism, but AT&T announced a \$100,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of those responsible.

Hundreds of thousands of AT&T, Verizon, Nextel and Sprint customers with land lines, cell phones and Internet service were affected.

Reminiscent of the hours after an earthquake, widespread communications interruptions baffled emergency service providers, businesses and residents as cell phone chatter, Web surfing, ATM, credit card and other electronic data sharing came to a screeching halt overnight.

NETCOM, the dispatch center for most police and fire agencies in Santa Cruz County, was able to receive 911 calls placed from land lines, but could not receive calls placed from cell phones, senior dispatcher Stephanie Zube said. Because the only phone number many land line phone owners could call was 911, Zube said the center received countless calls regarding the blackout.

Service was expected to be restored by midnight or earlier in most places, authorities said. AT&T cell service came back on around 5 p.m., while Verizon customers had intermittent service by 8 p.m.

Even though non-emergency calls tied up lines at the Santa Cruz emergency center all day, Zube said dispatchers were able to communicate quickly over radio with ambulance operators, firehouses and hospitals about traffic accidents and medical incidents. But there is a possibility people reporting crimes or other serious incidents may not have been able to reach authorities by if their phone lines wouldn't place calls.

A sheriff's deputy went on KSCO radio Thursday to advise listeners to go to visit sheriff's service centers or fire stations if they needed help. Deputies and ham radio operators were stationed inside the county's medical centers to aid communications between emergency responders and care providers.

The California Highway Patrol put two additional patrol officers on the roads and instructed

Advertisement



Creating Wealth with Real Estate

Learn How to Generate a Lifetime of Wealth!
Let Robert G. Allen, NY Times Best Seller, show you how.

RealEstateWealthSecret.com

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

officers to sweep remote parts of the county. The outage rendered emergency call boxes on highways useless and slowed the response of tow trucks to crashes.

Lt. Scott Wood said the impact of the outage "on our end, is not too much. It just puts us back into the '90s, where nobody had cell phones. ... We're really just back to the old squad car with the radio."

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina dispatched patrol cars throughout the city so people who couldn't reach 911 could flag down officers. Officers out on the street could access the Internet because computers in patrol units rely on radio rather than cell phone connections.

Sheriff's Sgt. Stefan Fish, who supervises the Live Oak Sheriff's Service Center on 17th Avenue, said a convalescent home employee walked in Thursday morning to get help because a 63-year-old resident had suffered a seizure and the rest home's phone wasn't working.

"Other than that, we've just had general walk-ins, people asking how to get their money out of the bank and things like that," Fish said.

How it happened

Authorities say the communications sabotage occurred in two separate incidents, one at 1:30 a.m. in south San Jose, and the other two hours later in San Carlos. Several companies piggy back on the cables owned by AT&T.

John Britton, a spokesman for AT&T, said it appears vandals opened a manhole and climbed down at least 8 feet to cut four or five fiber optic cables along Monterey Road just north of the Blossom Hill Road exit. The second vandalism was along Old County Road near Bing Street in San Carlos.

San Jose police spokesman Sgt. Ronnie Lopez said the manhole covers are heavy and would take quite an effort to lift, perhaps even requiring a tool.

Asked if the vandalism had anything to do with the contract negotiations between AT&T and the Communication Workers of America, the union's national spokeswoman Candice Johnson said, "Absolutely not. Our members are not involved in this." The union has threatened a strike, but none has been planned.

Johnson said the CWA would cooperate with the investigation, but she did not know if police had contacted the local union. AT&T's contract with the union expired at 11:59 p.m. Saturday.

"We have a really good relationship with the union," Britton said, adding negotiations continue between the two sides.

Even as communications were being restored, hard questions emerged about whether the system is too vulnerable to sabotage and how to prevent it from happening again.

Advertisement

DON'T DELAY

Get Proven, Proactive

Identity Theft Protection

CALL NOW



LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

1-877-670-1746

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

"Some of the questions that come up are whether the system has adequate backup capabilities and whether or not the phone companies are adequately protecting and maintaining the equipment they do have," said Mindy Spatt, spokeswoman for The Utility Reform Network, a consumer watchdog group in San Francisco.

The loss of land line, cell phone and Internet service was amplified by the fact that multiple carriers send traffic on the same fiber optic cables. For example, Verizon said more than 50,000 household land lines were affected as well as an unknown number of cell phone connections.

Cell phones function like miniature radios, communicating with cell phone towers via radio waves. The towers, in turn, communicate with a switching station either over cable or through microwaves.

"If the switch is not working, you are out of business," said Ken Fattlar, a Verizon engineer.

The incident revealed what many experts have known for years: the humdrum infrastructure behind daily routines is extraordinarily vulnerable to random accident or deliberate mischief. The lesson learned is that ordinary people need to be more vigilant about what is happening around them, said Theodore Lewis, author of "Critical Infrastructure Protection in Homeland Security: Defending a Networked Nation."

"We can't expect police and firefighters to watch every inch of fiber," Lewis said. "People shouldn't freak out, they should keep their eyes open."

Public services muddle through

Ham radio operators organized themselves to assist with communications between hospitals. About 25 operators were handling the radio traffic while another 50-60 had signed up to fill in when other volunteers got tired, operator Craig Smith said.

Ham radio operators are trained to help during emergency situations when traditional communication methods are unusable, Smith said. The operators helped with communications during last summer's devastating wildfires and were critical during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Teams of operators set up at Dominican, Sutter and Watsonville Community hospitals, as well as at NETCOM and a local American Red Cross office. They handled tactical traffic and messages between medical care providers, such as relaying information from one doctor to another.

"This is really big for ham radio," Smith said.

Inside Santa Cruz city offices, staff was hurrying to assemble next week's City Council agenda by hand. At the Central Branch of Santa Cruz Public Libraries, public computers were in high demand

Advertisement

PROTECT YOUR HOME

FREE

Home Security System!

\$850 Value!

CALL NOW and receive a FREE wireless remote control with PANIC BUTTON!



1-877-246-7519

Mon-Fri 9am - 10pm - Sat 9am-7pm - Sun 11am - 6pm EST



At no cost to you for parts and activation with only a \$99 installation fee and the purchase of alarm monitoring services. Terms & Conditions apply.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

as the library subscribes to Comcast, which was not affected by the outage.

Phone service at Capitola City Hall was so intermittent that people opted to walk in instead. For most of the day, there was no Internet access.

"It was weird," said Patty Wakefield, a receptionist at City Hall. "You feel so cut off."

Despite the technical difficulties, the City Council meeting planned for Thursday night took place as scheduled.

Watsonville City Manager Carlos Palacios said "everything was working pretty well," but he had to send two city workers to Marina to process the city payroll.

At Scotts Valley City Hall, the phones were ringing occasionally, as opposed to nonstop on a normal day. Some cell phone calls could get through around town, said Tamera Melrose, services supervisor, but, "You just can't call a land line."

Ironically, city offices had expected to have about 30 minutes of phone silence Thursday, as AT&T and Mitel replaced the city's trunk line. That project was delayed due to the larger communications outage, Melrose said.

It was mostly business as usual at the Shell gas station on Scotts Valley Drive at Granite Creek and Highway 17. While the credit card machines

and phones were working perfectly, the smog test machine wasn't.

If it were any other day, the machine would test a vehicle's smog level and send the passing score via the Internet to the Department of Motor Vehicles office in Sacramento. But Thursday, the machine could only store data on its computer until phone lines were restored.

Outage rough on local businesses

Thursday's blackout left local businesses struggling.

Many banks were closed or had to limit service if their computers were down, and ATMs throughout the county were also not working. Markets and coffee shops warned customers that credit card machines weren't working.

"It makes us recognize our reliance on technology," said Shannon Hayes, a barista at Fins Coffee in Santa Cruz. "Ten years ago this wouldn't have been that big a deal."

A piece of paper on her coffee counter read "Cash Only."

"Yeah, I've had to turn a few people away," Hayes said.

At Surf City Coffee in Scotts Valley, customers pulled out cash to get their java fix. Rafael Meng, sitting at a corner table, said he couldn't get an Internet connection on his laptop but his

Advertisement

DON'T DELAY

Get Proven, Proactive
Identity Theft Protection

CALL NOW



LifeLock®

#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

1-877-670-1746

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

Sprint cell phone service was working. He depends on technology to run his business, Summit Limousine.

When he heard service may be down until late in the day, he was surprised.

"It's going to be that long?" he asked.

Mike Pizzano, who runs 49er Rooter and Drain Service in Felton, was counting his losses just hours after he stopped receiving phone calls and Internet service. His two employees would likely be out a day's work.

"What am I going to do if a customer calls?" he said. "I may be missing a call for a clogged drain or a \$5,000 job."

Jason Revino, the owner of Jia Tella's Cambodian Cuisine in Scotts Valley, said business was strong Thursday, because he was willing to run credit card numbers whenever phone service was restored.

"It's a pain in the butt, but you deal with it," he said. "What am I going to do, close down?"

The problems weren't limited to small businesses.

The roughly 1,000 employees at Seagate Technology in Scotts Valley had only spotty telephone and Internet service throughout the day. Those with immediate communication needs left the office for their Sunnyvale campus while

others found ways to make do.

"We're managing," said Woody Monroy, vice president of global media relations. "People are finding ways to get their jobs done."

At El Palomar restaurant in downtown Santa Cruz, which is generally packed and loud over the lunch hour, the typically bustling taco bar was quiet as customers read the newspaper. Newsstands all over Pacific Avenue were bare as readers turned to the printed page for their news instead of the Internet.

Phone and Internet service at the Sentinel was down all day, leaving the newspaper unable to publish updates from its Scotts Valley office or receive incoming phone calls. However, editors and the publisher were able to access the newspaper's Web site from their homes, where they posted updated stories using Internet services not affected by the outage.

Daily life interrupted

Phone service was sporadic countywide. Some customers could receive calls but not place them. For others, it was the other way around. Throughout the county, relatives, friends and co-workers were stuck without a way to communicate urgent messages or even those more mundane.

Real estate agent Arnoldo Gil-Osorio of Sotheby's International Realty in Santa Cruz couldn't get through to a relative to deliver an

Advertisement

DON'T DELAY

Get Proven, Proactive

Identity Theft Protection

CALL NOW



LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

1-877-670-1746

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

important message.

"I haven't been able to reach my daughter," he said. "She's celebrating her birthday today."

Sentinel staff writer Alia Wilson, after finding a pocket of cell phone service, became upset after receiving a message from her boyfriend's mother that he hadn't arrived for a morning appointment. His cell phone couldn't be reached, either by cell or land line.

"Automatically, I feared the worst," the 23-year-old reporter said. "As soon as I got that voicemail from his mom, my heart sank. I knew something bad happened."

In fact, Mark Sanfilippo, 22, had crashed his motorcycle downtown Santa Cruz, which Smith learned only after calling Dominican Hospital from the newspaper. A charge nurse explained that he had been treated for cuts to his leg and was released. The two were reunited at home in the afternoon.

Parents didn't have to worry about younger children because many schools were on spring break. Classes at UC Santa Cruz, however, were not canceled despite students, faculty and staff being unable to access outside e-mail servers or Web pages.

The University Office of the President established a temporary Web page for UCSC families to read updates about the outage. The real campus Web site could not be accessed off

campus.

Campus users could e-mail each other through the UCSC system and navigate campus Web pages, but they could not receive other e-mail. There was no cell phone service at UCSC, but campus hard lines could connect to each other and some local land lines. Most emergency phones posted throughout campus were operating. No emergencies were reported, spokesman Jim Burns said.

Senior Nick Rose-Henig said he heard students bemoaning the lack of outside Web access for services like Facebook or outside e-mail. Although he's not on Facebook, he said the blackout would keep him from completing reading assignments online and conducting research for a project.

"It will be really hard to do it without the Web," he said.

After living in the Santa Cruz Mountains off and on for 15 years, Julie Scopazzi said Thursday's outage pointed out the need for stronger communications networks. Living at the top of Mountain Charlie Road at the Summit, Scopazzi, 47, said her phones and Internet were working fine, but she could not reach Santa Cruz-area clients for her home-based marketing business.

"We really need to push for new technologies that make wireless more reliable," she said. "Forbes and Fortune are calling land lines so last year,' but what about in situations like this?"

Advertisement

<p>DON'T DELAY</p> <p>Get Proven, Proactive</p> <p>Identity Theft Protection</p> <p>CALL NOW</p>	 <p>LifeLock #1 In Identity Theft Protection™</p> <p>1-877-670-1746</p>
---	--

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

Sentinel staff writers Donna Jones, Genevieve Bookwalter, Jennifer Squires, Kurtis Alexander, Ramona Turner and Jondi Gumz contributed to this report, as did the San Jose Mercury News.

Advertisement

PROTECT YOUR HOME
FREE Home Security System!
\$850 Value!

CALL NOW and receive a **FREE** wireless remote control with **PANIC BUTTON!**



1-877-246-7519
Mon-Fri 9am - 10pm - Sat 9am-7pm - Sun 11am - 6pm EST



At no cost to you for parts and activation with only a \$99 installation fee and the purchase of alarm monitoring services. Terms & Conditions apply.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™