

Expert predicts wireless traffic jam

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A South Coast radio communications expert said Wednesday the nation may soon surpass its capacity to handle all its wireless devices.

Andrew Seybold discussed bandwidth limitations at the Cabrillo Arts Pavilion at the MIT Central Coast Forum attended by some 100 people, including Mayor Helene Schneider.

Mr. Seybold, a Santa Barbara resident, is one of the mobile wireless industry's top experts for strategic consulting, research and analysis.

"I am very concerned that we're going to run out of bandwidth," Mr. Seybold said. "By 2012 we may exceed capacity. We may be out of bandwidth next year."

He said 96 percent of the U.S. population uses a wireless voice device

while 86 percent use some other type of wireless device.

And, he said, 50 percent of the streaming traffic is video, which uses a great deal of bandwidth at one time.

Bandwidth refers to the amount of data that can be transmitted in a fixed amount of time. The Federal Communication Commission regulates bandwidth and sells it to communications companies. Mr. Seybold contends the spectrum on which bandwidth can be used is about full.

Today's array of wireless devices includes everything from e-books to global positioning devices and even some dog collars, he said.

"We can't create more bandwidth," he said. "We need to get away from what we are doing on the Internet."

For example, using browsers on

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Despite sounding an alarm about the issue, Mr. Seybold expressed some optimism about the government's ability to deal with the problem.

Mr. Seybold said the Obama administration has addressed the issue of bandwidth and several bills have been introduced in Congress.

"I think the FCC will find what we need," he said.

Mr. Seybold also stressed the need for more cell sites — antenna arrays that allow wireless communications devices to operate better. The number of South Coast cell sites will triple in the next three years, but some communities such as Montecito are opposed to adding any more, he said.

"Cell site growth since 1997 has been great," Mr. Seybold said, "but it's moving very slowly now because everybody says, 'Not in my backyard.'"

In Santa Barbara County, Mr. Seybold said, it takes more than two years to obtain government approval for a cell site, which costs about \$250,000 to build.

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smartphones is not a good idea because of all the bandwidth it uses, he said.

"Wireless data consumes much more than a phone call," he said.

To provide broadband to more people, "It's not about technology; it's not about building more networks," Mr. Seybold said. "It's about economics."

Eventually, he said, communication companies will have to create a subscription-type system to mete out bandwidth per family. It might be similar to how residents of a certain area pay for utilities such as gas and electricity.

Not everyone on the forum's panel of experts agreed with Mr. Seybold.

Henry Baker, an MIT engineer, said the issue is not the amount of bandwidth remaining, but how it all can be used more efficiently.

But another panelist believes Mr. Seybold's views are correct.

"It's no exaggeration," said panelist Bob Fasulkey, vice president of engineering for Digital West Networks, Inc.

Other panelists included Jay Hennigan, one of the founders of one of the first ISPs in the Central Coast and now director of Network Engineering at Impulse Advanced Communications.

Mr. Seybold and his colleagues agreed that more efficient use of bandwidth would expand its use. However, they said the "latency" issue might prevent that since the quality of communications might be diminished.