

SOUND BYTES



> gadget of the month NOT A MOMENT TOO ZUNE

ZUNE // \$250 // ZUNE.NET

IT'S NOT OFTEN a gadget is as heavily anticipated as the Zune was this summer. Tech bloggers parsed the minutiae of leaked information about the portable MP3 player to within an inch of its life. But a full five years after Apple revolutionized the music market, Microsoft's answer to the iPod finally made its official store debut in November. Manufactured by Toshiba, the 30-gigabyte Zune closely resembles the well-established iPod, except for one key feature that other MP3 players don't have: wireless communication, which allows users to share content with other Zune units. Users can import some kinds of existing content from iTunes or Windows Media Player, but are encouraged to buy from the online store, Zune Marketplace. Pay as you go using "Microsoft Points," described as similar to a pre-paid phone card (songs go for 99 cents each) or get a Zune Pass subscription for about \$15 a month. The player also comes equipped with an FM radio and is preloaded with songs, music videos (several selections are from local Sub Pop Records), images and film shorts, which can be viewed on its 3-inch color LCD screen. It's too soon to tell whether the Zune's networking capabilities will make a dent in the iPod market stranglehold, but it's certain that the bloggers will be the first to let us know. —Niki Stojnic

Pierce County Unplugged

THE NEXT TIME you hop on Link Light Rail in downtown Tacoma or drive out to rural Pierce County, you might want to bring along a laptop.

The Rainier Communications Commission (RCC), a regional consortium of local governments that focuses on telecommunications in the South Sound region, is pushing for wireless broadband service in Pierce County and has chosen telecom giant CenturyTel to help make it happen.

In September, RCC announced it would work with CenturyTel and SkyPilot to identify pilot cities in Pierce County to test the idea. First up: Steilacoom. On deck: Frederickson, Orting and University Place.

CenturyTel says it will build beta networks at no cost to participants, and provide residents and businesses with free service during a 60-day test period. If the pilot projects are successful, says Bill Oltman, RCC's director, individual town councils will vote on whether to enter into agreements with CenturyTel, which would then make multimillion dollar investments to cover the more densely populated parts of Pierce County with wireless broadband service.



Oltman points out that the wi-fi project could help improve emergency services in Pierce County. CenturyTel has offered to build a separate public safety backup system at no charge while it builds the wireless broadband service. Emergency first-responders, he adds, "would be able to send video back from remote areas to local hospitals."

It's not the first time the South Sound has pushed for a stronger tech infrastructure. In 1997, Tacoma Power spent \$100 million to build Click! Network, the largest city-owned cable television and high-speed internet entity in the United States. Tacoma then began billing itself as "America's No. 1 Wired City."

If the wireless beta tests work, the city may have to come up with a new nickname. —Todd Matthews

T-MOBILE BULKS UP

T-MOBILE USA, the nation's fourth-largest cellular provider, is preparing to duke it out head-to-head with the likes of Cingular, Verizon Wireless and Sprint Nextel by beefing up its multimedia services with nearly \$7 billion in planned upgrades over the next two years.

In October, the Bellevue-based company announced plans to spend \$2.7 billion to improve its wireless network. Earlier this fall, the company paid \$4.2 billion for a new wireless spectrum that it won in a federal auction.

The new upgrades will enable the company to provide its subscribers with faster internet access. T-Mobile expects the improvements to be completed by 2008 or 2009, although some customers may be offered new services by next year.

The company also plans to launch a new technology called Unlicensed Mobile Access, or UMA, which will allow cell phone calls to link automatically to either a cell network or to a wi-fi router without interruption.

T-Mobile, which held a 10.6 percent share of the mobile services market in the second quarter of 2006, expects that the new cellular capabilities will help it reach its long-term goal of increasing the number of subscribers from 23.3 million to 35 million or more by 2015. —G.B.

