Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

MAY/JUNE 2022

CONNECTION

Network building

Why does getting fiber take so long?

TASTY TRADITIONS

TEXAS BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL

NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION®

RURAL CONNECTIONS

By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association

A partner to support RURAL AMERICA

The Foundation for Rural Service makes a difference

Our members work hard to serve our nation's rural communities, but they do not do it alone. I'd like to shine a spotlight on an organization whose work I respect, appreciate and support.

The professionals of the Foundation for Rural Service, known as FRS, deserve praise for all the benefits they provide to thousands of people. Established as a nonprofit in 1994, they have made a positive difference for nearly 30 years.

Many of you may know their efforts to help educate young people in rural communities through scholarships and the popular Youth Tour trip to our nation's capital. FRS also annually takes key congressional staff out into our communities to see the challenges faced when deploying broadband.

In particular I want to give a special nod to the annual FRS Community Grant Program designed to benefit communities served by NTCA members. The goal is to support local efforts committed to improving and sustaining rural America. The grants have four areas of concentration: business and economic development, community development, education and telecommunications — the last is a chance to highlight a local plan to support broadband resources for telehealth, education and more. For more information about these programs, visit www.frs.org.

Just like the NTCA member serving you, a remarkable community partner where you live, FRS combines the resources and visibility of all NTCA members to benefit communities like yours across the country.

Get your free annual credit report

Spot scammers early

A free credit report is one of the quickest ways to spot identity theft — someone taking your name, date of birth, address, credit card or bank account information, Social Security or medical insurance numbers.

Scammers can quickly drain a bank account, run up charges on a credit card, get a new credit card in your name and more.

What is a credit report?
A credit report is a summary of your personal credit history, including identifying details such as an address, date of birth and information such as whether bills were paid on time or someone has filed for bankruptcy.

Three national credit bureaus — Equifax, Experian and TransUnion — collect and update this information.

The credit bureaus must:

- Make sure the information they collect about you is accurate
- Give you a free copy of your report once every 12 months
- Give you a chance to fix any mistakes

How do I order my free annual credit reports? The simplest solution is to visit AnnualCreditReport.com. It's fast and easy.

Cryptocurrency 101

A beginner's guide to the new currency

For many people, the idea of cryptocurrency, or digital money, is downright mysterious. Still, cryptocurrency has been around more than a decade, and a growing number of people are starting to use and invest in the world of virtual coins and tokens.

But what, exactly, is it? How does it work? And how do you get it?

CRYPTO BASICS

Put simply, cryptocurrency is digital money. There are no physical coins or paper dollar bills you can pull out and put in a billfold. But it's also not backed up by any asset. According to bitstamp.net, cryptocurrencies are a tradable asset in and of themselves. Their price is determined by demand and the supply available.

Like gold, cryptocurrency's value is in its scarcity and its uses — or potential uses in crypto's case, according to an Investopedia article in December 2021. Bitcoin, which is the most valuable of the different cryptocurrencies, is limited to a quantity of 21 million bitcoins. And while gold is often useful for industrial applications and in valuable jewelry, crypto might be of service in a number of retail transactions one day.

HOW TO GET IT

Most people buy it online and store it in a virtual wallet. The easiest way to buy cryptocurrency is through one of many centralized exchanges that come up on an online search. There are several types of cryptocurrencies, including the three top ones: Bitcoin, Etherium and Tether.

CRYPTO AND TAXES

The banking system and the government do not oversee cryptocurrency transactions. Instead, these transactions are supported by blockchain, a technology that tracks who owns what. But that doesn't mean cryptocurrency isn't taxable. In fact, the Internal Revenue Service taxes cryptocurrency as either property, investment or earned income. Because of this, crypto dabblers should keep careful records of all their transactions.

UPS AND DOWNS?

Cryptocurrency is known for its volatile market. In one day in 2021, Bitcoin dropped by 30% — a huge fluctuation in any other trading market. As a new currency that's not legal tender and which any government can issue, crypto can move wildly up or down based on just about anything — perceptions, news articles or, most notably, a tweet from tech entrepreneur Elon Musk.

RESEARCH AND START SLOW

To find out more about cryptocurrency, make sure to do your research. Seek out sources crypto advertisers or others with vested interests in particular products aren't backing. Those determined to try it out should invest conservatively while learning more about the market along the way.

Crypto lingo

Knowing more about cryptocurrencies requires learning new words and phrases. Here are a few that are sure to pop up frequently:

FUD — FUD is an acronym that stands for "fear, uncertainty, doubt." In the crypto world, FUD is negative information that can deter investors.

HODL — HODL is an acronym for "hold on for dear life," but internet lore jokes that its origins came from a typo for the word "hold." Either way, cryptocurrency investors use it to caution others against selling when the market is volatile.

NFT — NFT stands for non-fungible tokens. NFTs are pieces of digital content linked to the Ethereum blockchain. Non-fungible basically means that the digital content is unique and cannot be replaced. Because of this fact, NFTs make digital works of art and other items into one-of-a-kind assets.

Sats — Short for Satoshis, sats are the smallest fraction of a bitcoin that you can send — 0.00000001 of a bitcoin. Hardcore bitcoin traders look at sats, not the dollar amount of bitcoin. Note: Satoshi Nakamoto is the made-up name of the person or people who created bitcoin.

Congratulations, graduates

A bright future awaits

Throughout our community, young adults are experiencing a milestone — they're about to begin their first post-high school summer. It's a moment that deserves celebration — a cap on 12 years of hard work and accomplishment.

RUSTY DORMAN
General Manager

Even if you're like me and the high school years have been in the rearview for a while, the memories can still seem fresh. After all, this is such a vivid time, one often filled with excitement, hope and, quite possibly, trepidation. Each of these young people will soon make choices, many of which have been years in the making. Some of them will go on to higher learning. Others may breathe a sigh of relief to leave school behind and enter the workforce, start families or explore countless other possibilities. All graduates must choose their own paths.

Some of our young people have already faced adult challenges, working jobs or carrying responsibilities that, in an ideal world, would have waited until they were older. Life isn't the same for everyone, and it's often difficult. We appreciate that the circumstances for each high school graduate are unique, and we hope we can offer one consistent thread of support to all members of the communities we serve. At Eastex, we often discuss the principles that are the bedrock of what we do, one of which is concern for the community.

Our communications network — our fast, reliable internet service in particular — can open doors that didn't exist just a few years ago. Online learning, work-from-home jobs, support for employers and so much more are now available. We are in a rural area, but we have an immediate connection to resources needed to thrive in a modern world. The playing field is more level than ever between cities and communities like ours.

One example of success is the young people leaving high school today and the link they have, not only to the online world, but also to real-world resources once unheard of in rural communities. Imagine moving away for school or a job and being able to use a video call to connect with family back home. No matter how far our graduates roam, there's a convenient link to the people who have supported them every step of the way.

We believe, however, that helping the community goes beyond the services we provide, and we know many other local businesses feel the same. Scholarships, internships, support for athletic programs and first jobs are just a few ways we work to help students attending our schools and this current group of young graduates about to strike out on their own.

While this is a time of celebration for the Class of 2022 and their families, I believe it's also a time for us to celebrate as a community. Life will bring hurdles and triumphs. Many of these former high school students will go on to become part of the fabric of our communities, and others will venture away, carrying the values and lessons they learned here with them for the rest of their lives.

I wish to congratulate all the graduates and their families. Thanks to you, the future is bright, exciting and filled with possibilities.

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Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

A member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people in the Henderson, Livingston and Waskom areas.

Eastex is proud to offer broadband through Eastex Net, and security and automation services through ECS Solutions.

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On the Cover:

Eastex is working methodically to expand its fiber network so every customer has access to high-speed internet service. *See story Page 12.*

No stamp necessary

Paying your Eastex bill doesn't have to mean dropping a check in the mail.

Customers can sign up for e-billing, pay their bill and view their account information online at eastex.com/paybill. Automatic draft payments are also available, as is paying by phone using a credit or debit card or check.

Customers who sign up for e-billing or automatic draft payments will receive a one-time $5 bill credit. Contact your local Eastex office for details.

APPRECIATING OUR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Eastex Telephone Cooperative is grateful to the essential workers who are vital to keeping our communities safe, healthy, supplied and informed. Please join us in thanking those whose sacrifices and dedication to their chosen fields benefit us all.

- National Hospital Week, May 1-7
- Teacher Appreciation Week, May 2-6
- National Nurses Week, May 6-12
- National Police Week, May 15-21
- National Public Works Week, May 15-21
- National Emergency Medical Services Week, May 15-21
- National Nursing Assistants Week, June 16-22

thanks Mom and dad!

Don't forget to show your parents a little extra love this spring. Mother's Day is Sunday, May 8, and Father's Day is Sunday, June 19.

GAME ON!

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ANSWERS

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9	8	5	2	6	1	3	4	7
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2	4	9	3	5	7	9	1	8
5	3	6	8	1	9	7	2	4
7	1	8	9	2	4	9	5	3

Memorial Day

Eastex offices will be closed on Monday, May 30, in observance of Memorial Day.

©Artlana, Manon Labe, Tartila, Pavel, Brad Pict/Adobe Stock

THE JOY OF SUMMERTIME

Whether you're looking for thrill rides or family time, there are theme parks that dot the Texas coast and deliver a day — or even more — of fun.

Going to an amusement park is an adventure for the whole family. Some may go for the thrills of dropping down from the sky while others may enjoy the chills of a haunted house. Still others might go for the food. There's an assortment of fun and fare to be had, and Texas offers a boatload of it.

"The waterfront along Texas' coast offers amusement parks with picturesque views, engaging midway games, live entertainment, fantastic food and seaside thrills on roller coasters stretching over the Gulf of Mexico," says Tim Fennell, director of Travel Texas, an office responsible for promoting Texas as a premier travel destination. "These family-friendly parks are a fun, nostalgic way to enjoy the scenic Texas coast and make a captivating addition to any itinerary."

Here are some parks that offer thrilling rides, good food and family fun, so head to the coast and prepare yourselves for the action.

PLEASURE PIER, GALVESTON

Pleasure Pier is an iconic piece of Galveston's history that has entertained Texans since it opened in the 1940s. At that time, admission was free, and there was a ballroom for dancing, along with carnival rides, a movie theater and more that drew thousands to the Gulf shore annually. Hurricane Carla destroyed much of the pier in 1961, but it reopened for a few decades until it met the wrath of Hurricane Ike in 2008. Today, though, it has reopened with a new look that has retained the charm it had when it opened almost a century ago.

Now parkgoers can experience thrilling roller coaster rides, an aerial high-swing, carnival games, shops and food, giving it the nickname: "Coney Island of the South." Swing your way up 220 feet on the Texas Star Flyer, loop your way around the park on the Iron Coast Roller Coaster with a magnificent, death-defying vertical drop or take a slower approach to Pleasure Pier on the carousel. The 5-D Theater Ride will blow your mind as it takes you on a heart-pounding ride deep down a mine shaft or puts you face-to-face with a prehistoric Megalodon. There are 17 rides at Pleasure Pier, plus an area where you can test your gaming skills at ring toss and other games.

All-day ticket prices are $19.99-$26.99. Family packs start at $89.99 for two adults and two children. For more information, log onto pleasurepier.com or visit the park's Facebook page.

History meets fun at Pleasure Pier in Galveston, where there's a little adventure for everyone. Rides, games, food and more create a classic destination on the Gulf of Mexico.

KEMAH BOARDWALK, KEMAH, TEXAS

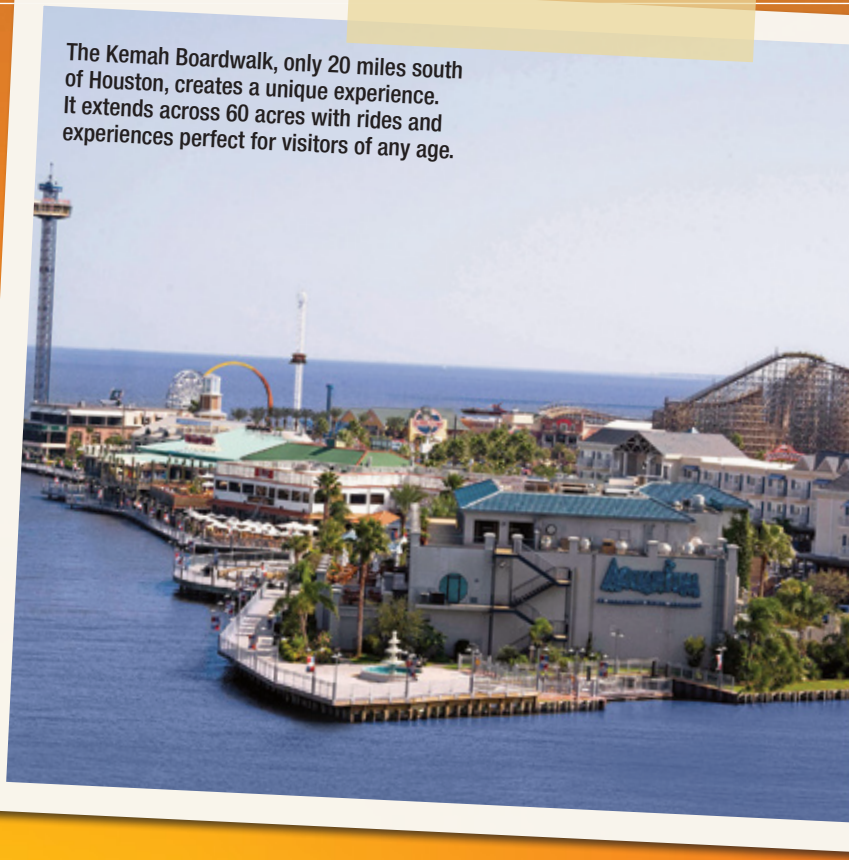
Race across Galveston Bay in a giant speedboat or test your bravado on the Boardwalk Bullet, a one-of-a-kind wooden coaster, as it loops and plunges its way around its track. Or try the Drop Zone with its 140-foot drop that will make your heart race. It's all part of a day spent at Kemah Boardwalk just 20 miles south of Houston.

Many consider the boardwalk, lying along the shores of Galveston Bay and Cedar Lake, one of the best in the country. Spread over 60 acres, it has everything you'd want for an exciting getaway to the coast. Not only does it boast incredible rides, it's a megaplex filled with restaurants and shopping venues.

There are rides appropriate for the little ones, such as a double-decker carousel; a ride aboard a replica of the famous 1863 C.P. Huntington train; or the Wonder Wheel, a pint-size version of a Ferris wheel. Pack bathing suits and let the kids frolic in dancing water fountains. There's also an arcade and playground on-site.

Dining options range from seafood at Landry's to Tex-Mex at Cadillac Bar and steaks at Saltgrass, among a dozen other eateries. Individual ride tickets are $5-$20 while all-day passes are $18.99-$24.99 and are available for unlimited excitement on every ride except for Boardwalk Beast, Iron Eagle and Stingray Reef. Want to make a weekend of it? Book a room at the only hotel on the boardwalk, Boardwalk Inn, with 58 rooms overlooking Galveston Bay.

For more information, visit kemahboardwalk.com or search Facebook.



The Kemah Boardwalk, only 20 miles south of Houston, creates a unique experience. It extends across 60 acres with rides and experiences perfect for visitors of any age.

GRAVITY PARK, SOUTH PADRE ISLAND

Defy gravity at Gravity Park on The Rocket, the tallest reverse bungee jump in the world, or take a nerve-wracking ride on the Skycoaster, a giant swing that'll hoist you 110 feet into the air. But the real thrill comes when you pull the ripcord and plummet back to terra firma. There are go-kart tracks for both kids and adults, a 60-foot Ferris wheel, a trampoline ride, an arcade, mini golf and a climbing wall. What the park may lack in size it makes up for in family fun.

Individual ride tickets for kids' rides are $8. Prices for adult rides, golf and go-karts are $10-$25 with senior discounts for golf available.

For more information, jump on over to gravitypark.squarespace.com or visit the park on Facebook.

The Texas Blueberry Festival features old-fashioned fun. Attractions include a 1951 Ford F1 pickup, the Mr. and Miss Blueberry Pageant and lots of delicious treats.

Photos courtesy of Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce

Red, white & Blueberry

Texas Blueberry Festival is a slice of Americana

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

As the oldest town in Texas, Nacogdoches, established in 1779, has a deep appreciation for the past. The county's chamber of commerce hosts an annual festival that's a throwback to days gone by. With attractions like pie eating contests, a pet parade and a dunking booth, the Texas Blueberry Festival is good, old-fashioned fun.

"Festivals like this are nostalgia for a lot of people," says Grace Handler, festival chairperson. "They don't want their kids to miss out on something that meant so much to them when they were growing up. To be able to hold onto a little piece of history is important."

Blueberries take center stage at the festival — from the Kiwanis Club's blueberry pancake breakfast fundraiser, to a blueberry-themed penny press, a cupcake battle and more. The fruit was an important cash crop in Nacogdoches for decades, and the festival pays homage to that agricultural history.

ONE OF A KIND

The event, the only blueberry festival the Texas Legislature sanctions, will celebrate its 32nd year on June 11. It draws 25,000 visitors and counting to downtown Nacogdoches.

Some of the festivities, including a bluegrass concert, the Mr. and Miss Blueberry Pageant and the Festival of Quilts, will take place before the fun kicks off downtown on Saturday morning. "We're trying to make this more of a blueberry festival weekend," Grace says. "It's really exciting to see the growth. Every year, the anticipation for the blueberry festival just builds. It's just so awesome to be a part of that."

Visitors can peruse the offerings of vendors on the square or head down to Festival Park for the car show and children's activities area, featuring a petting zoo and inflatable bounce houses. Although vendors' tents may block views of their storefronts, most downtown businesses are open on festival day, eager to welcome visitors. "They really enjoy people coming in," Grace says.

The festival's long-running success is due, in large part, to the enthusiastic support of the community. Tipton Ford is the festival's presenting partner and the dealership's president, Neal Slaten, even brings his 1951 Ford F1 pickup — with the festival's logo emblazoned on the door — to the event as a centerpiece for visitors' family photos.

Every year over 150 volunteers give their time to the event. Some arrive at 4:30 a.m. on festival day to help ensure vendors have everything they need. Another group takes the late shift, making sure the streets are pristine once again. "We have great relationships with everyone. Everybody pitches in," Grace says. "These are top-notch volunteers and partnerships with other organizations downtown."

A FAMILY TRADITION

Many people who came to the festival as children are now returning with their own kids. The Texas Blueberry Festival offers not only an opportunity for a fun family outing, but also a reminder of the benefits of slowing down for a day and enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

"You can get back to the basics. You can spend quality time with your family and walk the beautiful streets of Nacogdoches," Grace says. "You can share time at a slower pace. It's quality time that you can spend with your family and be involved in different things that you don't see every day anymore."

32nd Annual Texas Blueberry Festival

Saturday, June 11 • 8 a.m.-4p.m.
in downtown Nacogdoches

For more information, including a full list of activities and competitions, go to texasblueberryfestival.com.

A delicious destination

Smoke in the Pines brings red-hot barbecue teams to Livingston

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

Livingston is known as a recreation destination, thanks to the lake that shares its name. Now, the local chamber is working to put the city on the map as a barbecue hotspot, too.

The Livingston-Polk County Chamber of Commerce launched Smoke in the Pines BBQ Cook-Off in 2020. This year's competition will take place in Joe Pedigo Park on June 24 and 25. Spectators are welcome, and the event also includes vendor booths and a car and motorcycle show.

Although it began during the early days of the pandemic, the competition is off to a promising start. "This was all right in the middle of COVID, so I feel really blessed that we were able to muster up 52 teams in 2020," says John Clifton, the event's chairman. "Last year, we did 54, and I think 60 is achievable this year."

MEAT THE COMPETITORS

While a handful of locals fire up their pits, most of the competitors are out-of-towners. "A lot of our teams are from the Houston area and the Gulf Coast," John says. "A few come from Central Texas and the Dallas area, and several from Louisiana. The reserve champion last year came from somewhere in the Valley."

A panel of local judges taste each entry in five categories — brisket, ribs, chicken, beans and cook's choice, which can include just about any dish without a category of its own. Winners are ranked to divvy up the prize money.

The International Barbecue Cookers Association sanctions the cook-off, which features cash prizes totaling at least $5,500. That purse will grow to $7,500 if 75 teams register. If at least 50 teams submit entries in all three IBCA meat contests, the cook-off becomes a Jack Qualifier, meaning the grand champion will be entered into a lottery to compete in the Jack Daniel's World Championship Invitational BBQ in Lynchburg, Tennessee.

Youngsters can get in on the action, too. Kids ages 5 to 17 are eligible to compete in the Kids' Que, where the competition provides them with a grill and pork chops to prepare. "From what I gather from the judges, some of the entries were very, very good," John says.

SHINING A LIGHT ON LIVINGSTON

The cook-off is the chamber's latest venture to draw in visitors. "Hopefully they'll come spend a weekend and cook with us and decide it's a great place to come back to," John says.

The chamber makes sure teams experience Livingston-style hospitality while they're in town. Volunteers check in regularly to ensure competitors have everything they need. "We just want to be sure that we make everyone feels at home while they're staying with us," John says. "I think that's one of the things that sets us apart from the other events."

That approach is working. Many teams have already registered again, and John's heard from several who couldn't make it due to scheduling conflicts, but plan to return soon. "I think probably the best feedback you can have is returning teams, and most of the teams are coming back," he says. "That always makes me feel like we're doing something that's a worthwhile trip for people to make."

Smoke in the Pines BBQ Cook-Off
June 24-25 at Joe Pedigo Park in Livingston

For more information, go to polkchamber.com/bbqcookoff or visit the event's Facebook page.

Barbecue teams come from as far as 600 miles away to compete at Smoke in the Pines for bragging rights and cash prizes.

Photos courtesy of LIVINGSTON POLK COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

GAMING on the GO

Your mobile devices have plenty to offer

Sure, mobile games may be a distraction many of us turn to while waiting in line or during a slow episode of our favorite TV binge. But that doesn't mean they have to be bad. As our mobile devices have evolved into tiny computers in our pockets, the visuals and clever design of mobile games have grown right along with them. If you're burned out on Angry Birds and Candy Crush, try one of these games to keep your idle thumbs busy.

Good Sudoku

There are plenty of sudoku apps available but only one that puts goodness right in the name. The game's designers set out with the goal of helping players fall in love with the familiar Japanese logic puzzles. Clear difficulty levels, helpful hints and coaching for new techniques at each level make it the perfect entry for the sudoku-curious out there. If you're already a logic master, it also has more than 70,000 puzzles to be conquered and a global leaderboard to chase.

THREES

You'd be hard-pressed to find a better puzzle game than Threes. It's easy to pick up since there are only four directions a player can swipe. But the task of pairing numbers into ever greater multiples of three can quickly become a challenge requiring players to think at least three moves ahead. Whether you're looking to pass 5 minutes or chase high scores on the leaderboard, Threes is worth checking out.

Among Us

Among Us became wildly popular in 2020 in part because it's easy to understand. A group of players attempts to prep their spaceship for takeoff while one imposter tries to pick the others off while no one is looking. It's a simple premise that can lead to chaotic hijinks as players try to smoke out the saboteur. Lying to your friends has never been so fun.

DEVICE 6

Who knew your phone could be the perfect platform for a clever noir story? Device 6 puts players in the role of Anna, a woman with amnesia trying to figure out how she woke up on a mysterious island. The game infuses the classic text adventure genre with modern style and engaging visuals as words move around the screen in unexpected ways. If you're looking for something a little different from the typical mobile experience, Device 6 is bound to have a few welcome surprises in store.

NYT CROSSWORD

Sure, you could pull out the newspaper and pen to fill out your crossword the old-school way. Or you could save yourself the ink stains and errors by tackling the daily crossword on your phone. The app offers Mini and Midi puzzles for a challenge you can knock out in minutes. Or take on the full crossword each day, along with the archive of over 10,000 puzzles. Now there's no excuse not to stay sharp.

Make the CONNECTION

The video game industry remains scorching hot, and not just because people turned to a virtual distraction during the pandemic. Certainly, they did. However, the trajectory of the gaming industry continues a yearslong trend of increased popularity.

Nielsen, a company tracking how various audiences use media, provided some insight last year into video game usage.

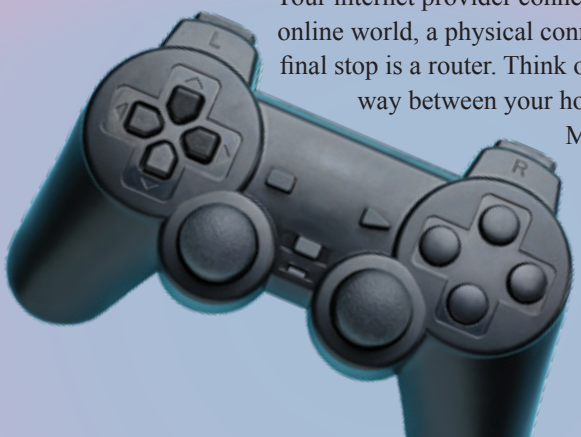
At one point during the pandemic, 55% of U.S. consumers reported playing video games. In fact, people were buying games at a fast clip, with sales rising about 14% during 2020.

There's a twist with modern gaming, too. People use it to connect with each other. The game Fortnite became famous for in-game live events, and more and more people began using services like Twitch to watch others play games, according to Nielsen.

Simply, gaming goes beyond, well, just a game. It's an experience, one made possible by fast, reliable internet.

But are you maximizing your connection for how you experience gaming?

THE CONNECTION



Your internet provider connects your home to the online world, a physical connection where the final stop is a router. Think of this as the gateway between your home and the internet.

Most modern routers allow two types of connections: Wi-Fi and Ethernet.

BENEFITS OF WI-FI

Wi-Fi uses radio waves to connect the router to your devices, eliminating the clutter of cables. Devices ranging from televisions to refrigerators can use this technology to connect online.

Gaming-related benefits of Wi-Fi include:

- Convenient for mobile games on phones and iPads.
- The ability to connect multiple devices without cables.
- Most devices, including computers, set-top boxes and more, have Wi-Fi connectivity. The same can't be said for wired Ethernet connections. Even some laptops lack the option for an Ethernet connection.
- For watching streaming content such as Twitch, Wi-Fi wirelessly takes devices ranging from TVs to tablets online.

BENEFITS OF ETHERNET — WHEN GAMING GETS SERIOUS

An Ethernet connection is a physical link between your device and router. With modern online gaming, success can depend upon how fast the twitch of a finger on a controller can be translated into actions in an online world living on a faraway computer server.

When speed matters, an Ethernet is often the right option.

- Consistency: Unlike Wi-Fi signals, which can be affected by walls or even signals from other devices, the wired connection's speed should remain consistent with that provided by your internet service.
- Lower latency, which is the time it takes a bit of data to leave your device, reach its online destination and then complete the round trip. With gaming, lower latency is critical, and Ethernet is a difference-maker.
- Simple and secure: Connect an Ethernet cable to your device and to your router and get playing. It's that simple. Unlike with Wi-Fi routers, you typically do not need to enter a password to connect.
- The downside is that cable clutter is real. Serious gamers in particular, though, will benefit from devices connected via Ethernet.

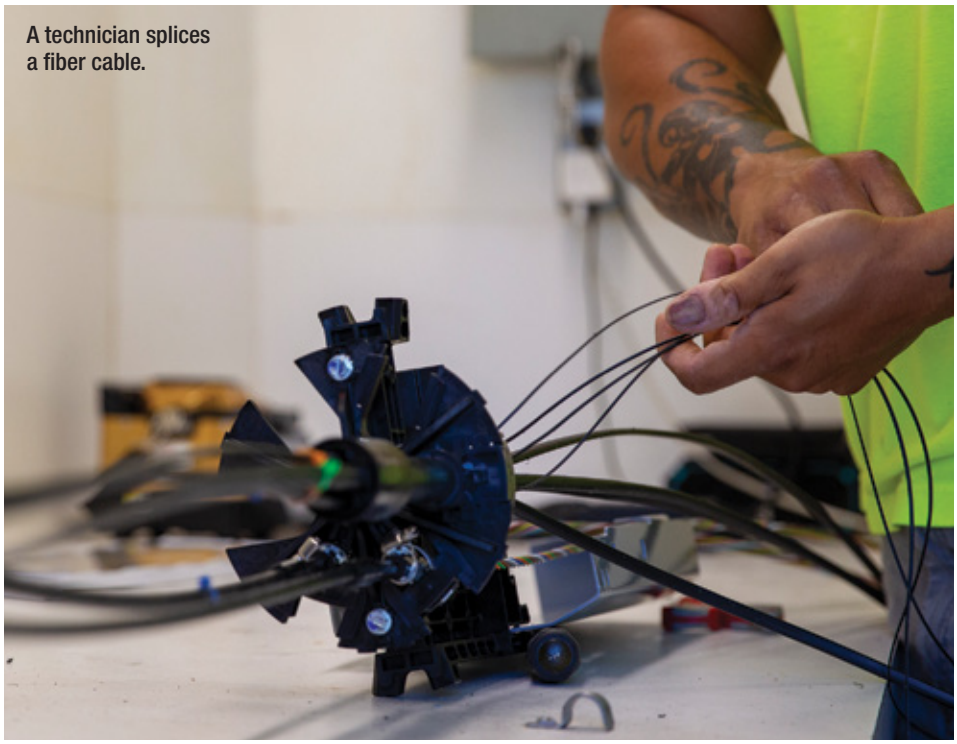
What's taking

Building a reliable fiber network takes time

Story By ANDREA AGARDY

Lightning-fast and dependable, fiber is the internet connection just about everybody wants. But most people don't realize how much effort, planning and money is required to build that network.

Eastex believes our customers benefit from understanding what goes into providing service to their homes and businesses. With that in mind, Connection is launching a series detailing the benefits of fiber and how we're expanding our fiber footprint. Let's begin by answering what at first glance seems like a simple question: What takes so long?



A technician splices a fiber cable.

BUILDING A NETWORK

Fiber optic networks send information as bursts of light along super-fine strands of glass. Fiber moves data across enormous distances much faster and more efficiently than earlier systems that relied on copper wires like those used in the first phone lines.

Fiber is less vulnerable to interference, especially from lightning, and offers enough bandwidth to handle the demands of today's devices and tomorrow's innovations. In essence, it's future-proof. "There's nothing we've found that's better, especially where we're located," says Eastex General Manager Rusty Dorman. "Wireless, satellite and cellular do not work very well here because of the pine trees, which do a very good job of blocking any kind of signal."

Building a fiber network is time-consuming and expensive. Since launching fiber-to-the-home service in 2016, Eastex has buried 1,764 miles of fiber throughout its 2,300-square-mile service area.

Decisions about where to go next come about thoughtfully. "The No. 1 deciding factor is where the population is the greatest and where the potential for growth is," Dorman says. "No. 2 is where your trouble spots are. If you have an area with aging copper that's giving you a lot of problems, you might put that ahead of other areas."

Money matters, too, of course. Eastex sets an annual capital expenditures budget. However, unexpected projects often demand immediate attention, diverting funds from new fiber builds. The engineering, construction and materials costs of fiber expansion are $60,000-$70,000 per mile, depending upon the terrain — and that doesn't even include the costs of hooking up individual customers to the network. "It's all about money," Dorman says. "We're funding it out of pocket right now and can only do so much a year. We can't spend money any faster than we're spending it and still spend it smartly. If we spent any faster, we'd be wasting it."

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

The geography of Eastex's service area poses a unique set of construction challenges that also affect the timeline. The 11-county footprint consists of six noncontiguous areas, which lie as far as 70 miles apart. Since running fiber to link those far-flung areas is cost prohibitive, Eastex leases circuits other carriers in the area own — to the tune of about $70,000 a month. Then there are the bureaucratic hurdles like navigating rights of way and obtaining necessary permits. "We've been

so long?

very fortunate. We have very good relationships with the state districts and our counties," Dorman says.

Adding to the red tape is the fact that some projects must cross national forest land, triggering a federal permitting process that requires extensive environmental studies and can take months, or even a full year, to complete. "We don't have any problems getting the permits, but we do have to abide by the process, and that takes time," Dorman says.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Eastex is not immune to the pandemic-related supply chain issues hampering industries worldwide. Orders that go in for fiber cables today may take 18 months or longer to fill. "It's not just fiber. It's everything that goes with fiber," Dorman says. "The interduct — that little orange pipe you see at the side of the road — that's hard to get, too. Just about everything associated with fiber has long lead times now."

Workforce issues are having an impact, too. Maintaining sufficient staffing levels is challenging for everyone from the contractors Eastex hires to install the fiber to the government agencies that issue permits. "Part of it is manufacturing, and another part is the workforce problem. The domino effect has finally happened, I believe," Dorman says. "This situation isn't unique to this industry. It's everywhere."

GET ON THE LIST

Eastex's goal is to replace copper lines with fiber across the entire service area, a process that will take years and millions of dollars to complete. But all the time and money will be well spent when every customer has access to the best service available.

Customers eager to get fiber service in their neighborhoods should contact their local Eastex office and express their interest. "I wish I could get it to everybody. I wish I could snap my fingers and say, 'Here you go!' but I can't," Dorman says. "There's just a lot involved, and COVID has really hurt because of supply and demand issues. Please bear with us, we are trying to get to everyone as fast as we can."

7 steps to build a network

1. **Planning and design**
   Months go into engineering, planning and designing the project before construction crews get to work.
2. **Preliminary construction**
   Contractors lay the groundwork for burying the fiber cable.
3. **Main-line fiber installation**
   Fiber cable is buried underground to build the network.
4. **Splicing and testing**
   Crews fuse/splice the fibers together and test the network.
5. **Fiber feeder**
   Fiber is extended from the closest splice point into the service area.
6. **Drop splicing**
   The outdoor construction wraps up when outside fiber is connected to the side of the customer's home or business.
7. **Home installation**
   Once the network is up and running, Eastex team members will visit individual homes and businesses to get them connected.

So *fresh* and so

A unique technique locks more flavor in your veggies

The profusion of fresh vegetables coming our way this spring means it's time to learn a bit about blanching, a technique that brings out the beautiful flavors that only fresh produce can bring — a taste explosion.

Blanching can be a cook's best friend. It destroys enzymes that make green veggies turn brown and mushy, so it's ideal when you want to add green vegetables, such as peas and asparagus, to your risotto. Blanching also removes bitterness from some of our more bitter vegetables, like broccoli rabe. It's also a great way to skin tomatoes, as blanching loosens the skins without cooking the fruit, something that also works for peaches and plums. And if you're planning to prepare and serve a veggie platter, blanch the carrots, broccoli, pea pods and cauliflower. The veggies will retain their color, but your guests will find them much easier to chew.

Blanching is nothing more than boiling vegetables until they're just crisp-tender, then plunging them in an icy bath. It sounds like a simple process, and it is, but there are just a few steps to follow to bring out the best of spring and summer's bounties.

If you're a vegetable gardener, think ahead for the cold days of winter when the flavor of fresh vegetables is just a memory, that is, unless you've blanched in advance of freezing them. Not only does blanching preserve the color and texture of your vegetables, it will also preserve their nutrient content.

FOOD EDITOR
ANNE P. BRALY
IS A NATIVE OF
CHATTANOOGA,
TENNESSEE.

Now that you know why you should blanch, here's how:

In order to stop the enzyme action that breaks vegetables down, the food must reach 180 degrees.

The time spent in boiling water and time spent in ice water should be roughly equal. If you're not able to prepare a cold immersion for your vegetables, putting them in a colander under cold running water will work.

Adding salt to your boiling water will help make green vegetables even greener. Steer clear of lemon juice or other acids, though; these will react with the chlorophyll and turn your greens brown. And don't use baking soda — it will damage the nutrients found in vegetables.

Use 1 gallon of water for each pound of food to be blanched. If you overload the water with vegetables, it will lower the water's temperature and slow the cooking process, defeating the purpose.

Once the vegetables are crisp-tender, move them from the boiling water and into a large container of ice water. This will stop the cooking process. Then you're ready to bag them for freezing or use them right away in your spring and summer meals.

clean

SALAD NICOISE

- 2 hard-boiled eggs
- 1/2 pound of small potatoes
- 1/2 pound of green beans, blanched
- 1/2 head of green lettuce, washed and torn into bite-sized pieces
- 1 (7-ounce) can of tuna fish
- 4 ounces of tomatoes, diced, or cherry tomatoes
- 10 black olives
- 2 tablespoons of capers
- 1/2 cup of vinaigrette dressing (your favorite)

Cook the potatoes until tender and let cool.

Build each salad starting with a layer of lettuce, then add half the vegetables, including potatoes, tuna, eggs and olives to each plate. Sprinkle with capers. Serve with vinaigrette dressing. Makes 2 servings.

RISOTTO WITH BLANCHED ASPARAGUS

- 1 pound asparagus, trimmed, cut into 2-inch lengths
- 5 cups canned or homemade chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 cup chopped onion
- 1 1/2 cups arborio rice
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 6 tablespoons butter
- 3/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese (about 3 ounces)

Blanch asparagus pieces in a large pot of boiling, salted water for 2 minutes. Drain. Rinse asparagus under cold water. Drain asparagus well.

Bring chicken broth to a simmer in a small saucepan. Reduce heat to low and keep broth hot. Heat olive oil in a heavy large saucepan over medium heat. Add chopped onion and saute until translucent, about 4 minutes. Add rice and stir for 3 minutes. Add dry white wine and cook until liquid evaporates. Continue cooking until rice is tender but still slightly firm in center and mixture is creamy, adding chicken broth 1 cup at a time and stirring almost constantly, about 20 minutes. Add blanched asparagus pieces and stir until heated through, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Add 6 tablespoons butter and stir until incorporated. Stir in grated Parmesan cheese. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Makes 4-6 servings.

WALNUT BROCCOLI SALAD

- 2 pounds broccoli florets
- 1/2 cup toasted walnuts
- 1/2 cup jumbo mixed raisins
- 8 strips bacon cooked and crumbled
- 1/2 red onion thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Bring a big pot of water to a boil and season it liberally with salt. It should taste like the ocean. Add the broccoli florets to the water and cook for 60 seconds, until they're bright green in color. Immediately drain the broccoli florets, then rinse with cold water for 2 minutes or place in an ice-water bath until the broccoli has cooled down.

Transfer the broccoli to a salad spinner, and spin the broccoli dry or drain well if you don't have a spinner. Then blot dry further with a kitchen towel to prevent any excess water from diluting the dressing.

Combine the broccoli with the toasted walnuts, raisins, bacon, onion, mayonnaise, vinegar and salt and black pepper, to taste. Stir well. Chill for at least 30 minutes, preferably an hour, before serving to allow the flavors to marry. Makes 6 servings.

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Congratulations TO ALL 2022 GRADUATES!

Eastex celebrates this milestone. We encourage you to embrace amazing opportunities in a world of possibilities.

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