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Phone service eludes homes

A group of residents northeast of Index continues to ask, 'Can you hear me now?' * Douglas and Jessica Rupp enjoy the remote location of their home, but several attempts have failed to connect them with a dial tone.

*By Yoshiaki Nohara
Herald Writer*

INDEX - A twisted, rusty steel line hangs above the North Fork of the Skykomish River, which runs through the valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains.

The 800-foot line, located several miles northeast of Index, connects Douglas and Jessica Rupp to the rest of the world, carrying them and their groceries on a wooden tram.

The tram, powered by a golf cart motor, has no doors and little to hold on to. It takes off from a tower, glides down and then up to an old, thick maple tree.

Near the tree, the Rupps live in a two-story house on a small hill, miles away from traffic and noise, away from people, and away from a phone connection.

Douglas Rupp, who works from home for a computer software company in New York City, has brought civilization to their home since moving here in 2000.

They have the essentials and much more:

- * Power and water from a nearby stream and solar panels on the roof.
- * Firewood to heat the home. n Three satellite dishes for the Internet, U.S. TV programs and a French channel. (Jessica Rupp is from Alberta, Canada, and knows some French.)
- * An M548 tracked cargo vehicle, an Army amphibious machine Rupp bought in North Carolina to move anything across the river that is too large or heavy for the tram.

"My goal is to make it just like living in a city," Rupp said, standing near the 81/2-foot-tall, 81/2-foot-wide and 20-foot-long Army vehicle.

He has succeeded in every way - except for phone service.

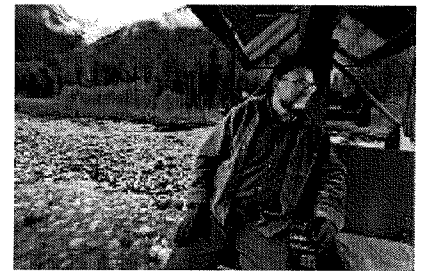
Rupp, 49, is a former Navy submarine officer who grew up in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and has degrees in engineering and computer science. The handyman has spent at least \$30,000 and hours of labor trying to get a phone connection for the last five years.

His neighbors across the river include seniors who want phone service to summon help in case of an emergency.

But Rupp wants a phone for convenience. He wants to call for a doctor's appointment from home, rather than taking the tram and driving to Index, where his cell phone gets reception.

He has tried several methods to get phone service:

- * Studying the area's topography, he built a 50-foot-tall antenna on the roof to boost his cell phone signal. It was not tall enough.
- * He pounded rungs into a 120-foot-tall Douglas fir, climbed the tree and attached an antenna to it. It wasn't tall enough, either.
- * He hired help to build a device at a different location to reflect a signal to an antenna in order to bypass obstacles. The original signal and



Dan Bates / The Herald

Douglas Rupp guides a four-passenger cable tram 800 feet from his home on the north side of the North Fork of the Skykomish River to the road on the river's south bank.

the reflected signal were too close and interfered with each other.

* He tried to move the device to a different place. He could make calls for a while, but the device quit working for unknown reasons.

* He tried a satellite phone. The sound quality was poor, and it cost too much, \$2 a minute.

"Hell with it," he said.

Rupp finally decided to take on a phone company. He and seven other families in the area asked Verizon Communications to extend phone service a few miles from Index to their homes.

The company balked at first, saying it didn't want to spend the thousands of dollars it would take for a small group of people, forcing other customers to subsidize the service.

But in late October, the federal government approved the merger of Verizon and MCI, a global communications provider. The deal should mean big savings for Verizon, which serves 49.3 million customers in the nation and generates annual revenues of more than \$71 billion.

In Washington state, as one of the conditions of the merger, Verizon offered to pay up to \$325,000 to provide phone service for the eight families near Index.

But state regulators last week ruled that the issue needed to be considered separately from the merger, again putting phone service up in the air for the Rupps and their neighbors.

Meanwhile, more than 100 of the rungs remain in the Douglas fir on the Rupps' 24 acres. A steel pipe, once used to hold an antenna, still sits on the roof of their house.

Rupp intends to stay here and keep fighting for phone service.

"I don't feel like I can quit now," he said.

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