

By Haidee V. Eugenio
Reporter

Connecting 'Blue Continent' poses engineering and political challenges

Big digital divide between Kiribati and Hawaii, Guam



If you think the CNMI has reason to complain about costly and sometimes slow Internet connectivity despite the short distance from network hub Guam, then think about Kiribati, Chuuk, Yap, Kosrae, or Palau which have little or no access at all to cable.

“Only the main island of Tarawa has Internet, but only a few have it and they are very expensive. Most [secondary and tertiary] schools do not have computers. Those that have computers do not have any Internet at all,” Matiota Kairo, a member of the Kiribati Parliament, told Saipan Tribune yesterday.

Kairo is one of three delegates from Kiribati now attending the Association of Pacific Island Legislatures' 31st general assembly on Saipan. Kiribati is one of the world's poorest countries.

“Compared to Fiji or American Samoa, we're very far behind. We do not have money to develop our telecommunications infrastructure. Our problem also is that telecom is controlled by the government. I don't think that's going to change in the near future,” he said.

Chris Sampson, president of Australian-based Digital Society Foundation, said that engineering and political challenges are the reasons behind the lack of or absence of cable connectivity in most of the so-called “Blue Continent” encompassing the members of APIL.

“It's more of an engineering design challenge [to have cable connection]. Funding is a political challenge,” Sampson told APIL members and guests at Fiesta Resort & Spa Saipan in Garapan yesterday.

Sampson, an expert on information management, systems and technology, said in an interview after his presentation that obtaining funding requires political or diplomatic skills and knowledge.

For island nations like Palau, negotiating with the United States or with other international bodies for them to provide funding to the island republic, for example, is a diplomatic challenge.

“It's an engineering design challenge to come up with a master plan. But funding is always political. And if we have a master plan in place, then I believe the pathway, the goodwill, the options or funding will emerge,” Sampson said, adding that if there's already a master plan, “that will accelerate the pace of change.”

Sampson said he was struck by the situation in Kiribati and the likelihood of having a “disadvantaged generation” among island nations.

“The kids there really have effectively no access to the Internet because they don't have cable, they have very limited satellite to share with the telephone connectivity. There is no local digital infrastructure. Those kids are missing the exposure to knowledge, to techniques, to social environment. And I think if they're not brought up with that and when they reach their late teens, it's hard to introduce that technology to the youngsters. And I worry about a disadvantaged generation,” he said.

Sampson said all economic activities now and in the future—even retail, and not only tourism—will require people to have skills with computer, using email, using websites, using collaborative technologies.

What can be done?

In his presentation, Sampson said APIL can influence each of their government's priorities to include telecommunications.

He also asked the region's lawmakers to draw the world's attention to the risk islands face.

“Build a regional consensus. Collectively lobby for international funding,” Sampson said, as he suggested two resolutions on the matter that APIL can adopt.

Others like Pohnpei and the Marshall Islands have better access to cable; the latter, mainly because of military installations.

“So I think we just need a more comprehensive coverage [on these islands],” Sampson said.

Hawaii, also a member of APIL, “is one of the most connected places on the planet,” he said. It is partly because of Hawaii's location, he said, while Hawaii Sen. Glen Wakai interjected, “good leadership.”

“The world's biggest economies are on either side of the Pacific Ocean, and they are massive trading partners—Japan on one side and U.S. on the other side. They have been putting cables between them for many years, and on engineering logistics side, they terminate the cable in Hawaii and then have another run heading west to east. So in fact Hawaii has become incredibly well connected,” Sampson said.

Guam, according to Sampson, is also a network hub but he believes more work is needed for the Guam community to gain the true benefits of the art of being connected. Guam has military installations.

Sampson, however, believes that the short distance between Guam and Saipan should also in effect make Saipan or the CNMI a hub but this isn't necessarily so.

“I see no reason why Saipan can't also be an international connectivity hub with the best high-speed broadband and you know that this economy really needs more diverse activity. It can't just be about tourism. We need to invest in those youngsters who want to be engineers, who want to be researchers, and other things than tourism service providers,” he said.

Wanted: Competition

Sampson suggests telecommunications liberalization and creating competition in the CNMI.

“If you have wholesale capacity then you can give multiple companies access to the wholesale and to the retailers access to that capacity. You need to create some vibrancy and some competition in that space,” he said.

This is where APIL or political leaders come in.

“They can really help because they can create a regulatory environment to allow competition, to open up that capacity and to a certain extent it's about getting people to understand this new world,” he added. Rep. Stanley Torres (Ind-Saipan), chairman of the CNMI House Committee on Public Utilities, Transportation and Communications, said he supports competition and that is why he looks forward to the newly reconstituted Public Utilities Commission to review GTA TeleGuam's application to obtain a certificate of authority to expand its business to the CNMI.

“Prices of Internet and other telecom services will go down if you have competition, if you have IT&E and GTA in the CNMI, and hopefully others in the future,” Torres said.

PUC officially stopped business on Jan. 30 for lack of quorum but recently, the governor swore into office three individuals to serve on PUC. It's not yet known when PUC will be able to formally meet and take up GTA's application.

Sampson was just one of the presenters during the second day of the four-day APIL general assembly.

Others were Gerry Perez, president of Micronesian Cruise Association-Guam, presenting on an emerging regional cruise industry opportunity; Mark Ittel, partner and vice president of ports and maritime division at Bermello, Ajami & Partners Inc.-Florida, on creating a policy framework for a viable cruise industry; CNMI's Mel Catalma, Michael Ogo, and Richard Seman on aquaculture, agriculture and fisheries; Dr. Robert Richmond of the University of Hawaii and Dr. Meg Caldwell of the Center for Ocean Studies, on climate change in the Pacific islands; and Dr. Steven Kuartei, president of the Pacific Island Health Officers Association and Dr. Greg Dever also of PIHOA, on non-communicable diseases and policy changes.

The APIL summit continues today and wraps up tomorrow with a trip to Managaha Island.