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Three Rivers-based Rural Communications Inc. completed a network for voice, video and data transfer between Sturgis Hospital and eight remote sites.

"Today the network we've provided is strictly for IP (Internet protocol) based communications," said Ray Bonkowski, director of technology for Rural Communications. "It is capable of transporting voice, video and data – but they're not using it for voice right now." The network connects doctors' offices affiliated with Sturgis Hospital, including Bronson Family Health Center in Bronson, Colon Medical Clinic in Colon, Constantine/White Pigeon Medical Center, Howe Medical Center in Indiana and four offices in Sturgis with the hospital.

Those sites now can connect to the hospital's main computer center at more than 50 times the speed of the previous system. The sites can communicate by voice, but they cannot go outside the IP network to the public switched telephone network using that system. Conventional telephone lines handle that. Rural Communications has operated primarily as a wireless broadband provider, but it also provides telephone service using conventional phone lines. Those lines don't belong to Rural Communications.

"Our traditional phone services are UNE-P" – unbundled network elements platform, Bonkowski said. The Federal Communications Commission in February ordered an end to UNE-P by March 2006. (See Business Review's March 17-23 and March 24-30 editions.) "That's why we're in the process of converting to wireless."

"We are becoming our own facilities-based telco," said Shelby Cotton, director of operations. That includes building complete Voice-over Internet Protocol phone service. Rural Communications is discussing that service with Sturgis Hospital and some other business customers, Bonkowski and Cotton added.

Concerns about wireless reliability during power failures is valid, Bonkowski said, and Rural Communications urges potential customers to look at disaster recovery and redundancy throughout their networks. He urges battery backups to bridge the gap between a power failure and the time generator-backed systems come into play.

Should a building catch fire, Bonkowski said Rural Communications can restore service at a new location in a matter of hours rather than days. "Our newest platform of our phone service that we're rolling out this quarter – one of the key blocks in designing it is redundancy and the ability to reroute traffic depending on a network's being up or down or a resource being available," Bonkowski said.

The company – whose informal motto is "We Don't Fear Backhoes" – has expanded service from a 20-square-mile area to 520 square miles in two and a half years, Bonkowski said. It is in the process of identifying eight new locations for coverage in Branch and Cass Counties.