

SPEEDING UP THE HILL

Beacon Hill gets its own wireless Internet service.

For the Beacon Hill Brahmin who has everything comes a private wireless Internet service that works exclusively within the cobblestoned confines of the city's toniest neighborhood.

CyberDistrict (www.cyberdistrict.com) provides an instant link for anyone on Beacon Hill with a computer and a modem card. About 25 people have joined up so far.

"These are vice presidents, CEOs, CIOs, who have high-speed Internet at the office and want the same capabilities at home," says **Orman Beckles II**, a 36-year-old developer at **Viant Corporation** who created the service from his Pinckney Street apartment. What they don't want, he says, is the hassle of stringing cable for DSL connections through the walls of their historic homes.

Beckles has been patrolling the streets with his laptop testing signal strength. He's talked to civic groups about adding multimedia elements to walking tours that crisscross the hill's narrow streets. When visitors get to a historic site, he says, a server could



JUST OFF THE WIRE: Orman Beckles stands at the peak of a new movement.

transmit Web pages, audio, or video that could be read on a handheld computer screen or heard over a wireless phone.

Eventually, says Beckles, "the Internet will be anywhere you are. I'm looking forward to sitting on my front steps and checking my e-mail or watching the BBC news."

The CyberDistrict concept is likely to grow beyond Beacon Hill. The research company **Aberdeen Group** forecasts that, in three years, 74 million wireless users will be connected to the Web via handheld devices and cellular "smart" phones with Internet access.

No Vacancy

Too many guests, not enough rooms for local hotels.

What if there's a convention in Boston, but the only available hotel rooms are in Worcester? Local hotel analysts have another crisis to add to the many other

headaches of the planned convention center ["Conventional Wisdom," February]: the unabating shortage of rooms.

"We're in a quandary," says **Geoff Baekey**, head of hospitality at **PriceWaterhouseCoopers**. "We're starving for additional rooms, and it will get worse before it gets better."

Occupancy rates are above 75 percent in most downtown luxury hotels, Baekey notes, but hoteliers have been stymied in their efforts to find sites. The San Francisco-based **Kimpton Group**, for example, prefers to redevelop older buildings, but hasn't found one it can economically reuse.

The other problem is that lenders are getting stingier with money for hotel projects, forcing smaller hotels to be shoe-horned into wherever developers find space. Downtown Boston and the convention center will need thousands of new rooms, yet only modest projects are emerging, and they carry hefty pricetags. It cost more than \$20 million to build XV Beacon, for example, a luxury hotel with only 61 rooms. And a mere 190 rooms are being built at the 90 Tremont Street hotel.

AMERICA'S PASTIME

Baseball business on the Web.

Any kid can learn to memorize Nomar's batting average. But how many understand the supply-and-demand curve for tickets, or the salary negotiations between players and team management?

Such baseball issues are explored on the **Federal Reserve Bank of Boston** Web site (www.bos.frb.org/peanuts) with a game called "Peanuts & Crackerjacks: The economics of pro team sports." Questions range from stadium financing to why tickets and hot dogs have become so expensive.

The game covers lessons nobody ever got from Dad. And it must have been developed by disgruntled Red Sox fans. Consider this introduction: "Sports seem to offer less haven from harsh reality. Owners threaten to move their teams unless taxpayers foot the bill for new sports facilities. Players and their agents hold out for salaries that exceed the gross domestic product of a small country."

THE BULLPEN

SpeechWorks, Boston

Founded: 1994

Cofounders: Michael Phillips and Bill O'Farrell

Employees: 350

Product: Automated speech-recognition technology used in call centers, and to allow browsing on the Internet by voice, including over wireless phones

Major clients: FederalExpress, E*Trade, United Airlines, BellSouth

Stock symbol: SPWX (Nasdaq)

One-year high: 108.5 Low: 11.94 Now: 14.88