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Bob Shallit: Gold River WiFi firm says it's near a deal with BART

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A Gold River startup company is on the verge of a breakthrough deal with the BART system to provide lightning-fast Internet connections for thousands of daily commuters.

Even while zipping along beneath San Francisco Bay.

WiFi Rail Inc. has been testing its system on various Bay Area Rapid Transit routes for the past several months.

"Hopefully we'll have (a contract) by the end of the month," says **Cooper Lee**, CEO of the 2-year-old company.

BART spokesman **Linton Johnson** confirms that negotiations are under way and that testing "has been going very well."

If a deal is struck, Lee says WiFi Rail will install the system on BART's most heavily traveled underground routes – in Oakland, San Francisco and the Transbay Tube – within 120 days. Coverage for BART's entire 103-mile system would follow.

WiFi Rail also is in talks with other large urban commuter rail systems, including those in Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta and Los Angeles, says the 31-year-old company founder.

Users would pay about \$30 per month (or \$10.95 daily) to access the system, which delivers data at a blazing 15 megabits per second – about 10 times faster than standard DSL.

That speed "knocks the socks off" mobile Wi-Fi systems now operating on long-haul trains in Canada and Europe, says Lee, who previously worked on telecom projects in Africa and Mexico.

By connecting seamlessly to Wi-Fi access points deployed along the track, customers could even do video and audio conferencing – something impossible with existing Internet hook-ups via cellular, Lee says. Or consumers could download an iTunes movie, he says, that "immediately starts playing, without any hiccups."

Sacramento attorney **Gilles Attia**, who is the firm's corporate counsel, anticipates huge demand from rail commuters.

"Take a BART rider who gets on at Walnut Creek and spends 45 minutes going to downtown San Francisco" and back, says Attia. By plugging in, "he's added 1 1/2 hours to his work day."

The company launched in late 2005 with \$1.5 million raised from local angel investors. Attia expects WiFi Rail will bring in another \$15 million to \$20 million in a second financing round later this year.

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Fashion statement: Arden Fair mall has pulled off a retailing coup, luring the region's first **Armani** and **Kate Spade** stores.

Opening this summer is an **Armani Exchange**, a casual version of the Italian company's upscale clothing stores.

Among the offerings, aimed at younger men and women: Jackets, dresses, jeans, T-shirts, swimwear and fashion accessories. The Italian retailer will occupy space vacated last year by the **Discovery Channel**, says mall spokeswoman **Jennifer Prouhet**.

Opening in early fall, across from a downstairs **Coach** outlet, is the area's first Kate Spade handbags and accessories store. (Kate Spade will open a second regional location at the Roseville Galleria in November, following the Arden Fair debut.) Also arriving at Arden Fair this fall is the Sacramento area's first **Lucky Brand Jeans**, a Los Angeles company that describes itself as "rooted in rock 'n' roll and vintage-inspired."

Prouhet says another "first-to-market" retailer is about to complete a lease deal for Arden Fair. Any hints on its identity?

"It's a big name," is all she'll say.

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Tress chic: Despite a so-so start at its first location, a salon-boutique that opened last year on Del Paso Boulevard is expanding.

Article Salon Spa Boutique, at 1616 Del Paso, will open a second outlet July 15 at the Fountains "lifestyle" shopping center in Roseville.

The original is spectacular, with gleaming white floors and hair dryers dangling from the ceiling – a "minimalist showroom effect," says co-owner **Andrew Floor**. The new place will offer a similar "funky experience," but with more luxury, he adds.

Floor says clothes sales have been strong at the Del Paso location but the salon has struggled because stylists have been reluctant to set up shop there.

Floor anticipates no such problems at the Fountains location. His only concern? Hostility, he jokes, from salon owners losing their top stylists to the new Article.

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