

It's down to the wire!

Hibernia pressing ahead with a multi-million pound scheme to link NI to the rest of the world - via Portrush

Exclusive report: Peter Winter

THE unseemly political row that dogged the early stages of Project Kelvin is not something executives at **Hibernia Atlantic** are eager to talk about.

The US company awarded the contract to install Northern Ireland's first high speed telecoms link with the outside world were understandably bemused when politicians from Derry protested over the decision to locate the 'telehouse' in Coleraine.

Described by government officials as nothing more than "a small automated and unmanned facility" with "little or no prestige", only those who demanded its relocation to the Maiden City can explain the telehouse's apparent political significance.

Hibernia say the tender specified the 'county' of Londonderry, rather than the 'city', and, with the cable coming ashore just a few miles away in Portrush's West Bay, Coleraine seemed a logical choice. Nevertheless with political pressure mounting Hibernia relented.

Talking about the furore for the first time, vice president of network operations,

Derek Bullock was reluctant to rake over old ground and with drilling due to start this week, was clearly relieved to be pushing forward.

"It's a peripheral issue," he said, when pressed, "It was unfortunate, but we've resolved it at our own expense and moved on. We took a purely a business decision to make sure the project stayed on track. The important thing is, every town has exactly the same services and exactly the same access to capacity."

Telehouse or no telehouse, Coleraine will find itself in a much more advantageous position in the IT world by January 2010.

As the "first port of call", the town has a chance to establish itself as a communications hub - potentially attracting internet service providers, telecoms companies, firms that sell or run business online, media and entertainment companies, as well as financial institutions.

All this of course depends on the private sector taking an interest but already one local IT firm has lodged a planning application for a 'data centre' - a facility where vast amounts of content and information can be stored securely

on behalf of businesses hopefully sited nearby.

INTEREST

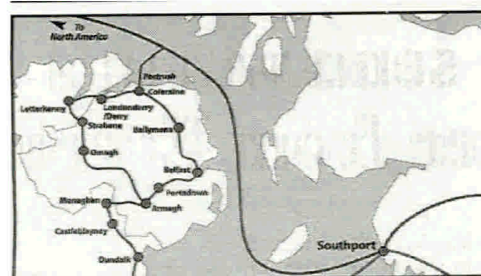
Derek Bullock said Hibernia were "thrilled" at the early local interest. "The department (of enterprise) are excited too, that's the whole idea of the project - to encourage entrepreneurs to move forward."

Data centres, he said, "guarantee up-times" adding, "the information is always available and can be sent to all parts of the world much faster."

A crude analogy for technophobes is to compare the cable to a new motorway - fast means of communication in and out of the country. But, to realise its full potential, businesses need to be based near an exit, avoiding country lanes and city streets before reaching the fast-track.

"It makes logical sense. When you start removing those complications it makes things simpler and more reliable.

As the last stop before the Atlantic, said Bullock, "Northern Ireland can effectively become the gate keeper for North America and Europe", placing Coleraine in perhaps an even more advantageous position than the seven other towns linked by project Kelvin. Further development is likely to take place near the cable landing station on property close to the



Hibernia Atlantic's existing network with the new branch connecting Northern Ireland. CC21-16s



Derek Bullock, Vice President of Hibernia Atlantic's network Operations, (rear, centre left) with (left to right) Bjarni Thorvardarson, CEO of Hibernia Atlantic, Stephen Swift and Mike Saunders, Vice President of Business Development with Enterprise Minister, Arlene Foster. CC21-69s

University. Already there are moves from the council and business community to persuade planners to set aside green belt policies for the greater economic interest of the Borough.

"There are very good, very clever people up there who understand what the benefits form the project are," said Bullock who has been impressed by co-operation Hibernia's received do far.

All this is in the future but Project Kelvin is already making waves among the companies it hopes to attract. And although tight lipped about specific names, Bullock said: "We have already been contacted at an international level. People are quite interested in this."

DISRUPTION

Now that work has already started,

Hibernia are keen to reassure residents of Portrush the project should create minimum disruption.

The specialised directional drilling rig installed in West Bay this week, will be operating for around 10 days creating a conduit stretching 500m under the sea bed. On June 20 a large cable-laying ship chartered from England will arrive off the coast to locate the existing cable linking England with North America which runs 22km offshore

Technicians plan to search the sea bed with a ROV (remotely operated vehicle) and once found, the cable will be hauled on board and cut. Then a 'Y' shaped branching unit will be inserted which will act like a 'fork in the road' creating an information

"express route" to Coleraine and beyond.

The cable will be slowly laid on the ocean floor over a period of days or weeks depending on the weather, then divers will attempt to thread it into the pre-drilled pipe taking it ashore.

It's a remarkably efficient way of connecting to the world - a snip at 30million euro compared to the 960 million Hibernia spent laying its original cable across the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, said Bullock, Department of Enterprise officials will be on site to supervise the spending of so much public money. "It's a serious investment by the taxpayer and they are very interested to make sure everything is going to plan."