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Cell Phones Linked to Track Real-Time Traffic

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by Mark Hachman

First there was Dash Navigation, then Telenav's Shotgun GPS. Now, a "Mobile Millennium" trial kicking off Monday in the Bay Area will use cell phones as the latest devices to form a real-time traffic network.

For now, the trial is restricted to those users who own Nokia phones that operate under either the AT&T or T-Mobile GSM services. Unlimited data plans are suggested, but not recommended. Users who meet these

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requirements can sign up for the trial and download the software, which is free of charge.

By April 2009, the project hopes to have 10,000 users signed up. Over time, additional phones will be supported, although even users who don't own a compatible phone will be able to access the data, just not contribute to it.

The Mobile Millennium project is a real-world test of the technology first announced as part of a "Mobile Century" trial in February. Both were partnerships between Nokia, U.C. Berkeley, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), Navteq, Safetrip-21, and CITRIS, the center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society.

In the Bay Area, real-time traffic information is already provided by 511.org, which anonymously monitors the FastTrak transponders used by some commuters to pay bridge tolls without leaving their cars. Because monitoring sensors must be mounted at various points around the Bay Area's freeway infrastructure, however, that method is both expensive and restricted to major freeways.

Initially, the Mobile Millennium project will restrict itself to those commuters who "drive between the Bay Area and the Lake Tahoe ski area," according to the organizers. The first phase will provide traffic data for highways, while subsequent phases will add "arterial routes," or data from expressways and other major streets.

"What Mobile Century enabled us to do on Feb. 8 is to create a situation of traffic representative of the near future and what the that means is enough cars per mile and a high enough percentage of cars on the highway for us to monitor speeds of cars, to monitor extent of traffic jams, and to monitor travel time," said Alexandre Bayen, assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering at U.C. Berkeley.

The software uses a technology called Virtual Trip Lines, and promises to anonymize the actual user data. Virtual Trip Lines is described as "a data sampling paradigm that anonymizes the GPS-based position information and aggregates it into a single data stream," the organizers said. "The aggregated data is then encrypted and sent to a computer system, which blends it with other sources of traffic data and broadcasts this real-time, data rich information back to the phones and to the internet through a user-friendly interface."

On Nov. 18, Mobile Millennium will showcase a custom version of the system that models urban traffic in downtown Manhattan at the Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) World Congress in New York City.

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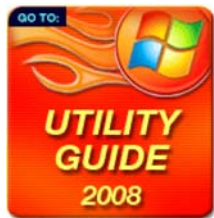
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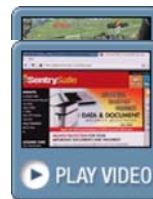
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