

HOME MONITORING: New Venture Offers Faraway Control

By Carissa Katz

The seeds of John Thorsen Jr.'s new business venture were planted five years ago when he bought a second home in Springs after visiting East Hampton for more than 20 years.



Every weekend, all year round, he made the trip from New York to Springs, and every time he arrived, just before he rounded the bend and his house came into view, he remembers "that moment of anxiety" when he asked himself was the house still there? Was there a fire? Did the pipes burst?

Mr. Thorsen, a software developer, spent a few years looking for an easy way to monitor and control his house remotely. There were mechanical devices that would let him set the temperature from a distance. His oil company installed a monitor that was supposed to alert them if anything went wrong with the heating system. But what he really wanted was "the ability over the Internet to connect to my home, adjust the thermometer, turn devices on and off."

The services that were available required a dedicated computer inside the house that would have to be on all the time. The downside of that is that "if the computer crashes, the operating system crashes," Mr. Thorsen said.

Shortly after moving his family and business, TECsoft, a software training firm, to the South Fork full time in 2000, Mr. Thorsen decided over a brainstorming dinner with friends that he himself should develop the home monitoring system he had been looking for. He worked with a group of software developers and engineers, including

a partner, Brian McAuliff of Bri-Tech Inc. in Bohemia, to design and build the system. Connected Hearth, the resulting Web site and home automation system, was launched on July 1.

Through the Web site, www.connectedhearth.com, and a control box in the house linked to the Internet, subscribers can check on things at home from anywhere in the world, provided they have Internet access.

"We are the only company that I'm aware of that can do it without a dedicated computer," Mr. Thorsen said last week from his office in Amagansett. The box that makes this possible is a little bigger than a standard fuse box and acts like a mini-computer. "But there is no hard drive, so it never crashes," Mr. Thorsen explained.

The box is installed in the basement and connected to the house's security, fire, and carbon monoxide alarms, thermostats, lights, and major appliances. Customers can press a single button at a wall console and turn all the lights in the house on and off or, if the system is hooked up to a stereo, press a button and set the mood for a party by dimming the lights and turning the music on. The console can also act as an electronic bulletin board where homeowners can display pre-set messages that can be read or changed from afar.

Subscribers can check on things at home from anywhere in the world, provided they have Internet access.

"You get a full-blown home automation system and also the ability to control your home through the Internet," Mr. Thorsen said.

From the Web site, subscribers can check the temperature at their house, set lights to go on at sunset and off at midnight, turn on the heat if there is an unexpected cold snap while they're away, or set the pool heater to go on so it feels just right by the time they get home.

Customers can also pre-program several series of commands, for example to close the house up at the end of the weekend or get it ready for their arrival on Friday, which can be activated with a single click of the mouse.

Each subscriber chooses a security code that the company does not have access to. Cameras placed throughout the house or outside also have secret passwords.

The server, which is in Bohemia, checks in with subscribers' houses every 60 seconds. If the heat spikes up or down, or a fire alarm goes off, or a leak is detected, it will automatically contact up to three specified people by e-mail, text messaging, or pager

to let them know there may be a problem at the house.

The price for a basic system, including connection to two cameras, two thermometers, 16 lights or appliances, and a security system, is \$6,000, plus \$59.95 per month to subscribe to the Connected Hearth Web site.

Mr. Thorsen said that was a small price to pay for peace of mind. "The average value of second homes here is \$1.7 million," he said. "For a lot of folks, that represents, I'm sure, their biggest investment and the one they've got a lot of emotional investment in."

He hopes Connected Hearth's customer base will also extend beyond the Hamptons to other parts of the country. "In this particular market, there are many second-home owners, but also third and fourth-home owners, with houses in Vail or Palm Beach."

[Home](#) | [Index](#) | [News](#) | [Arts](#) | [Food](#) | [Outdoors](#) | [Columns](#) | [Editorials](#) | [Letters](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Events/Movies](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Archives](#)