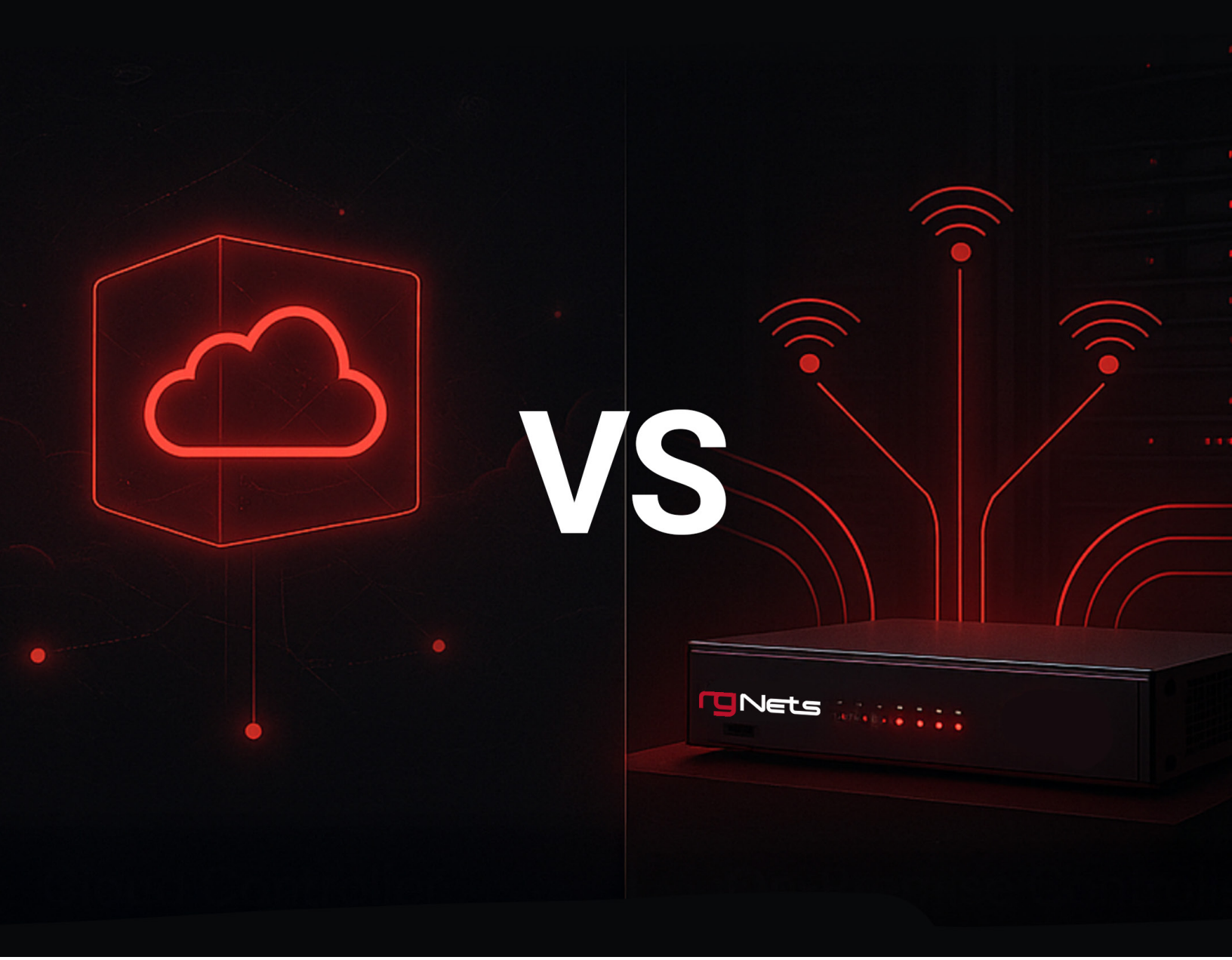


Cloud vs. On-Premise OpenWiFi Controller

A Capability and Cost Comparison in the rXg Ecosystem

rgNets

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of open networking standards and increased demand for customizable wireless solutions, OpenWiFi, an open-source initiative by the Telecom Infra Project (TIP), has gained significant traction. When deploying OpenWiFi in conjunction with RG Nets' rXg (Revenue eXtraction Gateway) platform—a popular gateway and network orchestration solution—network architects have the option of choosing between deploying a commonly used cloud-based or on-premise OpenWiFi controller. The latter scenario is enabled through the power of rXg platform capabilities, including the bhyve-based virtualization and automation for OpenWiFi integration.

This decision affects everything from operational efficiency and network resilience to security, total cost of ownership (TCO), and troubleshooting during deployment. One of the critical issues for implementers is how to manage access to the controller during the network buildout phase, especially in areas where the controller is not on-site and internet access is not yet stable (the so-called air-gapped Wi-Fi problem).

This article explores the capabilities, costs, and operational realities of both cloud and on-premise OpenWiFi controllers in rXg-driven environments, highlighting the specific difficulties associated with remote/cloud controllers during network rollouts.

Understanding the Context: The rXg and OpenWiFi

THE RXG OVERVIEW

RG Nets' rXg is a high-performance gateway platform that delivers core network services like routing, firewall, DHCP, DNS, content filtering, and advanced captive portal capabilities. It is widely used in multi-tenant networks such as MDUs, student housing, hotels, and public Wi-Fi deployments, including sport arenas, stadiums, and airports.

OPENWIFI OVERVIEW

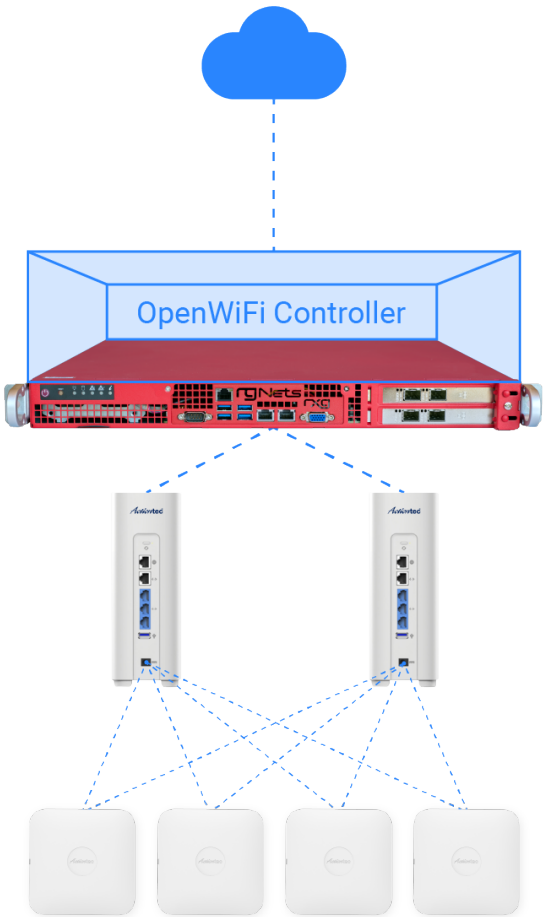
OpenWiFi is an open-source, disaggregated Wi-Fi architecture composed of a cloud controller, access point firmware, and other components. It enables innovation by decoupling hardware and software, providing protocol transparency and vendor neutrality.

Combining the rXg with OpenWiFi enables service providers to deploy intelligent, cost-effective, and scalable wireless networks with tight integration of policy, authentication, and analytics.

Cloud-Based OpenWiFi Controller

CAPABILITIES

- **Scalability:** Cloud controllers are designed to scale dynamically. Providers can support thousands of access points (APs) without the need for local hardware upgrades.
- **Centralized Management:** One of the most significant advantages is the ability to manage multiple sites from a central portal—ideal for MSPs and large enterprises, especially with multiple, geographically diverse sites.
- **AP Provisioning and Updates:** Automatic updates and provisioning make it easy to push firmware and configurations to devices, reducing overhead.
- **Integration APIs:** Cloud controllers often come with rich APIs that integrate with other cloud-native platforms like rXg, CRM systems, billing, or analytics dashboards.



On-Prem OpenWiFi rXg Controller

CAPABILITIES

- **Local Control and Immediate Access:** With the Wi-Fi controller on the local LAN, APs can register and receive configuration quickly—even without Internet access when the rXg is deployed on site and the Internet access is not yet available.
- **Simplified Troubleshooting:** During the build-out phase, engineers can directly connect to both the controller and APs, making debugging significantly easier, accelerating the deployment and getting the deployment ready before the property is completed.
- **Greater Autonomy:** There is no reliance on third-party cloud providers. Property management has complete control over software versions, network access, and updates, permitting them with independent operation of their network.
- **Tight rXg Integration:** When the controller is co-located with the rXg, policy enforcement, bandwidth shaping, and authentication become faster and more deterministic, providing improved performance while keeping the management overhead to the minimum.

CLOUD-BASED CHALLENGES

- **Dependency on Internet Access:** The controller must be reachable over the internet. During initial deployments or in unstable environments, this can be a critical failure point.
- **Latency and Debugging Issues:** Troubleshooting APs becomes complicated when there is poor connectivity between the APs and the controller.
- **Security Risks:** Cloud exposure requires careful management of firewall policies, encryption, and access control.

ON-PREM CHALLENGES

- **Scalability:** Depending on the initial rXg host, supporting a growing number of APs at a site may require periodic hardware upgrades, though the existing rXg clustering model provides a natural capacity migration path without the need for any production network downtime.
- **Remote Management:** Managing multiple sites with on-site Wi-Fi controllers requires a reliable VPN connectivity between sites - this is where the existing rXg capabilities come into play, including OpenVPN, WireGuard, and IPSec VPN solutions. Additionally, the rXg system supports a Fleet Manager (FM) function, which already has ability to control individual property rXg nodes and could evolve to add also Wi-Fi management functions if a market demand arises.
- **Maintenance Responsibility:** All tasks related with updates, backups, and monitoring become the responsibility of the property management team, usually heavily automated thanks to the existing rXg integration with OpenWiFi controller.

The Air-Gapped Problem

One of the most significant pain points with cloud-based OpenWiFi controllers arises when deploying a new network in a location where the controller is remote and there is no Internet access yet—what we'll call the air-gapped problem.

COMMON SCENARIO

- A network technician arrives on site to configure Wi-Fi APs.
- The location does not yet have an available WAN connection.
- The APs boot but cannot contact the cloud controller.
- As a result, they do not receive firmware, SSID, or other configuration data.
- Network build-out halts until Internet access is established.

IMPLICATIONS

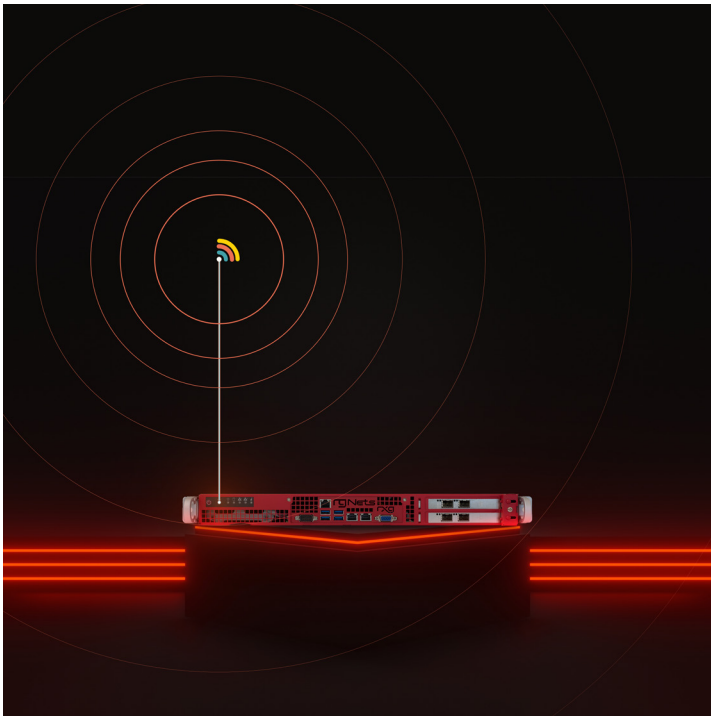
- Delays in installation timelines.
- Increased costs due to idle labor and rescheduling.
- Difficulty troubleshooting because logs and status are only available through the cloud interface.

SCENARIO SPECIFIC ISSUES

While the rXg is extremely capable on its own, it cannot compensate for the fact that in this particular scenario APs are effectively in a functionally limited state until provisioned via the cloud controller. This disconnect can frustrate integrators who expect to test user flows (e.g., captive portals, guest registration) to be accessible even before full WAN activation.

SOLUTION

The solution to this problem is to move the Wi-Fi controller from the cloud to the rXg deployed at the property, where even without the Internet access, individual APs can still communicate with the controller to be provisioned and properly configured. This allows local installers to proceed with the wireless network deployment, configuration, calibration, and optimization tasks early on, providing much quicker turnaround and allowing the network installation to be fully complete by the time civil construction tasks are done at the property.



Cost Comparison

Category	Cloud-based Controller	On-Premise Controller
Licensing	Monthly or annual per-AP licensing	Often open-source or one-time license
Hosting	Usually included in license, but may have tiers	One-time purchase of server-class hardware
Bandwidth Usage	Controller traffic goes over WAN	Requires on-site infrastructure
Initial Deployment	Cheaper up front (no hardware purchase)	Higher operational skill requirement
Downtime Mitigation	Requires fallback planning	Automatic backups, updates through rXg
Support & SLAs	Provided by vendor (included or tiered)	May require hardware upgrades over time
TCO (3-5 Years)	Higher for small deployments; efficient at scale	Lower for small/medium deployments

Strategic Decision Factors

Factor	Best Fit	Why
Remote/Distributed Environments	Cloud Controller	Easier centralized management
New Construction / Buildouts	On-Premise Controller	Easier to control during the property installation phase
Security-Conscious Environments	On-Premise Controller	Avoids exposure of controller to Internet, and limits security exposures
Multi-Tenant Operator (e.g., MSP)	Cloud Controller	Scales better and simpler management for multi-site deployments with shared configuration
Budget-Constrained Projects	On-Premise Controller	Lower long-term costs without recurring fees
Highly Volatile Connectivity	On-Premise Controller	Continues functioning in air-gapped deployment

Hybrid Alternatives & Mitigations

Some operators are now considering hybrid approaches to address the limitations of both models:

- Temporary On-Prem Controller: Bring a local controller appliance for deployment; switch to the cloud once WAN is active, provided that the centralized management for multiple properties is required.
- Controller-as-a-Service on the rXg: Use the rXg's container or virtualization support to host the OpenWiFi controller locally, which is especially attractive for single site properties not requiring centralized management for geographically diverse sites.
- Edge Cache/Proxy for Cloud Controller: Cache configurations locally and sync when internet returns (early-stage solutions).

These mitigations aim to balance resilience with scalability, especially in deployment-heavy environments.

Conclusion

Deploying OpenWiFi with the rXg presents a powerful, flexible solution for high-performance wireless networks. The choice between a cloud-based and on-premise controller hinges not only on cost or features, but also on operational realities during buildouts and ongoing maintenance.

The cloud controller is ideal for mature, internet-connected sites with multiple locations. However, its reliance on connectivity becomes a liability during the critical early phases of network installation as well as WAN outage scenarios, where local property services may continue to function unimpeded if the controller is hosted locally. An on-premise controller provides superior autonomy and control during initial deployment—especially when WAN connectivity is not yet in place.

For organizations aiming to avoid downtime and ensure smoother deployments, on-premise or hybrid models offer clear operational advantages, especially when leveraging the power of the rXg's policy enforcement and traffic shaping capabilities.

www.rgnets.com
sales@rgnets.com
316 CALIFORNIA AVE
RENO, NV 89509