

Asheville City Council endorses 'Wi-Fi City'

A proposal to make Asheville a "Wi-Fi City" -- via city-wide, wireless Internet access -- won unanimous endorsement March 25 from the Asheville City Council.

The plan, put forth by the nonprofit Mountain Area Information Network (MAIN), would provide secure wireless coverage -- including mobile access -- throughout the city.

"I'm pleased that the City of Asheville has officially endorsed MAIN's 'Wi-Fi City' proposal" said Asheville Mayor Terry Bellamy. "This effort will not only help bridge the Digital Divide in our community. It also signals to the nation that Asheville has a 21st-century vision for an inclusive and sustainable Digital Economy."

The network buildout will have a special focus on underserved neighborhoods, said Wally Bowen, MAIN's executive director.

MAIN's "Wi-Fi City" network employs a low-power wireless technology called "mesh" that's well-suited for residential neighborhoods, Bowen said. MAIN's mesh network is already operating in parts of nine Asheville neighborhoods.

Most free Wi-Fi "hot spots" are not secure and can't be used for confidential business, legal, and medical data, Bowen said. By contrast, MAIN's wireless service is secure and monitored around-the-clock to ensure commercial-grade service.

Local agencies and businesses offering in-home services have cited a growing need for secure and mobile broadband access.

Councilman Bill Russell agreed that small business-owners would benefit from secure, mobile Internet access. "I think it's fantastic. I see nothing but good can come from it," he said.

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Terry O'Keefe, a local technology consultant, cited the advantages of a locally accountable nonprofit network. "This network is an asset that belongs to this community in a way that no other technology infrastructure can be said to belong," O'Keefe said.

He predicted that MAIN's wireless infrastructure will support future applications "that we can't even imagine today."

Bowen noted that state regulatory changes in 2006 eliminated rules for upgrading cable and telephone networks in low-wealth neighborhoods,

portending a worsening Digital Divide in North Carolina.

"More of our residents enjoy the benefits of high-speed Internet access, but a broadband Digital Divide persists in our low-wealth neighborhoods," said Bowen, citing data from a 2007 Pew Internet and American Life survey.

While 47 percent of adult Americans reported broadband Internet access at home in 2007, the Pew survey found that only 30 percent of Americans with incomes under \$30,000 had broadband access at home. Only 15 percent of Americans over 65 reported broadband at home.

"This data clearly shows that our most vulnerable citizens -- our lower-income young and old -- don't have access to the health, education and economic benefits of broadband Internet," Bowen said. Many experts believed that municipal wireless networks would help bridge the broadband Digital Divide and create a "third pipe" alternative to the cable and telephone companies control of the Internet.

Bowen predicted that MAIN's nonprofit model will be seen as an attractive alternative to municipally-owned networks, which have had mixed success.

Operating in the tradition of rural telephone and electric cooperatives, nonprofit wireless networks are less vulnerable to shifting political winds.