If we're Tech City, where's our WiFi?
Advocates blame delay of a key study, need for project czar

By Keith Reed, Globe Staff | December 20, 2005

Wireless data networks are being installed free of charge in cities across the nation. But Boston, a city with a reputation for innovation and more than twice the population of some cities already luring big WiFi investments, isn't among them.

Towns with less than half Boston's population have gotten companies to pledge millions of dollars for so-called WiFi networks that blanket an entire city, offering little in return except access to light poles and the hope of charging residents and businesses usage fees. Cities like Akron, Ohio, and Tempe, Ariz., and Farmers Branch, Texas, each with populations below 300,000, persuaded a company to spend millions to build the networks, which provide high-speed Internets access to residents and businesses from anywhere in town.

But those involved in local efforts said the push for ubiquitous WiFi in Boston is hobbled by a key vacancy in city government and the delay of a study on the issue.

"No one's stepping up," said Michael Oh, a local technology executive and cofounder of the Boston Wireless Advocacy Group, a loose crew of volunteers pushing for more wireless access around town. "Boston is behind the curve on this compared to other cities."

WiFi, or wireless fidelity, allows devices to connect to the Internet at high speeds via radio waves. Many people have networks in their homes that can be accessed by passersby. Many coffee shops and hotels charge for access to their networks.

Boston's public libraries offer free WiFi, and the city's Main Streets program is testing a network in Roslindale that covers much of the business district between the Roslindale Village MBTA station and Adams Park. Boston Main Streets plans similar networks in Hyde Park, West Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and the South End.

Still, Boston has yet to make a serious attempt at setting up a citywide network, even as Mayor Thomas M. Menino's administration readies a technological overhaul of city services that includes proposals for city vehicles that can track potholes and burned-out streetlights and upgrading the city's 24-hour call center.

"We need to do it to keep Boston ahead of the curve socially, economically, and academically," said City Councilor John M. Tobin, who organized a summit in May to bring businesses, government, and community groups together to discuss the issue.

But so far, Boston has struggled as municipal WiFi has caught on in other parts of the country, because it combines the possibilities of access from city parks or street corners and free connectivity in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Google plans to turn San Francisco into a gigantic hot spot free of charge, and has volunteered to build a WiFi network for its headquarters city of Mountain View, Calif., population 69,011. Philadelphia is building its own citywide network with the help of Internet provider EarthLink.

NeoReach Wireless of Tempe, Ariz., agreed to build a wireless network to blanket all 62 square miles of Akron, at an estimated cost of more than $10 million. Cost to Akron taxpayers: zip.

NeoReach has already built a network in Tempe, and has agreements to do the same in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, Sacramento, Calif., and Farmers Branch.

So why can't Boston do it?

For one, WiFi advocates say, City Hall is without a permanent technology czar, a position that has been critical for cities successful in landing a WiFi sponsor. William "Bo" Holland, a long-time ally of Mayor Thomas M. Menino, has been acting management information services director for almost a year.

"You just need someone to talk, whether it's the mayor out there or a city councilor," said Rick Leu, Akron's chief technology officer. Leu led that city's negotiations with NeoReach.

Menino's technology initiative includes creating a new chief technology officer position in city government.

Marita Hopkins, Menino's chief of staff and the city's corporate counsel, blamed Boston's crammed geography and old infrastructure for companies' disinterest, not lack of leadership in City Hall. "I don't see anybody on the horizon right now because of the engineering investment" needed to build a WiFi network here, Hopkins said.

But Martin Levetin a NeoReach vice president who works from his home in Moultonborough, N.H., said his company needs little more than permission to use light poles and electrical outlets to set up a network. Levetin attended Tobin's May summit but said his company and the city have not spoken since.

"I'd love to have a chat with someone in the mayor's office or the appropriate councilman," Levetin said.

A study on WiFi in Boston, commissioned by the Boston Foundation and considered by some to be critical to local efforts, has also been delayed.

The foundation had hoped to release the document right after the summit, but Geeta Pradhan, the foundation's project director, said this week it won't be ready until mid-January.

Pradhan wouldn't discuss the study's contents, saying she did not want to reveal its findings before its release. "It's not as if the mayor's office is waiting for this report," Pradhan said.

But Oh of the Wireless Advocacy Group says the study could be a catalyst.

"There needs to be some people in the policy-making side of the city that have a nice concise report to give an overview of what's there, the cities that are doing it and what Boston can do to get in on this trend," he said.
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