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# Bad reception for free Wi-Fi

**Iconoclastic, tech-savvy San Franciscans don't buy into a plan to offer wireless Internet access.**

By Michelle Quinn and James S. Granelli, Times Staff Writers  
February 19, 2007

**SAN FRANCISCO** — In Los Angeles, officials want to blanket the city with wireless Internet access that's affordable to the masses. But their counterparts here can't even give it away.

In his October 2004 State of the City address, Mayor Gavin Newsom pledged that his administration would "not stop until every San Franciscan has access to free wireless Internet service."

Newsom forged a plan with Google Inc. and EarthLink Inc., under which the companies would build a Wi-Fi network offering two tiers of service: a free one, plastered with online advertisements, and a faster version without ads for \$21.95 a month. They would pay San Francisco to put signal-beaming antennas on its light poles.

But in a city where suspicion of corporate interests flows as thick as the fog, the plan is meeting resistance at every turn.

Dissecting every bit and byte, techies call the free service too slow and are pushing for alternatives. Privacy advocates fret that the Internet companies could track users' every move.

At one of the marathon meetings to debate the proposal, a citizen suggested that Google and EarthLink fork over more money — to supplement the electricity bills of San Franciscans who use their computers more as a result of the free access. Another suggested that Google use its vehicles to shuttle children to the local zoo.

More than two years later, the project hasn't gotten off the ground. Newsom signed a contract with the Internet providers in January. But the Board of Supervisors, whose approval is required, last week declined even to consider the deal, deciding instead to investigate turning the project into a city-owned public utility.

"We never thought it would be so hard to spend money in a city — or such a hard sell to give something away," EarthLink Vice President Cole Reinwand said.

More than 300 municipalities across the country are planning or operating Wi-Fi service. Los Angeles joined the pack last week when Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced plans for a citywide Wi-Fi system in 2009.

Most of those cities have escaped the political battles that are plaguing San Francisco. But many have been bedeviled by technical problems, including those caused by hilly terrain, tall buildings and even interference from garage-door openers.

In Lompoc, Calif., for example, a city-owned project struggled for a year to get going because the equipment and software didn't work properly. Lompoc had to increase the number of antennas in some areas and lower their position on light poles to limit interference from cordless phones and other household gadgets.

"For a public works project with new technology, a year's delay isn't bad," said W. Mark McKibben, a Chatsworth consultant who oversaw the project until May. "It's all bleeding-edge technology. It's painful any way you look at it."

Free wireless Internet access has become the populist project of the decade. It's envisioned as a way to overcome the so-called digital divide, boost local economies and improve public services such as police communications.

In Los Angeles, the technical hurdles will be high. Its 498 square miles and 3.7 million residents dwarf San Francisco's 50 square miles and 740,000 residents.

"Boy, we are big," said Charles Golvin of Los Angeles, an analyst at Forrester Research.

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"That's a lot of territory to cover in two years. We've had cellular networks here for years, and many people will be happy to tell you they don't have cellphone service yet."

Villaraigosa offered only a broad outline that calls for a public-private partnership, in which companies would pay the installation and operating costs. Building the system could cost more than \$60 million — money the operators could try to recoup through online ads and sales of better services.

In April, San Francisco chose its plan from among six. Atlanta-based EarthLink would create a wireless network and charge customers \$21.95 a month. Mountain View, Calif.-based Google planned to rent space on the network and offer a slower, ad-supported version free. Google is considering targeting ads by location so, for example, someone in Union Square searching the Web for a shoe store might see offers for nearby shops first.

But the American Civil Liberties Union, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and other advocates raised concerns about EarthLink's privacy policy. They also complained that Google's ability to track the whereabouts of network users could prove irresistible to law enforcement. (Google said people worried about such things could sign up using false names.)

Moreover, some citizens of this high-tech mecca aren't willing to settle for just any wireless connection, even if it's free. EarthLink's paid service is about three times faster than Google's free one.

The speed of the free service "is so 1997," said Ralf Muehlen, a software developer who runs a small free wireless network here and wants the city to push EarthLink for better technology. "I'm a techie. It's too slow for me."

The project's backers point out that the service isn't designed for the tech elite as much as for the estimated 30% of San Francisco households without Internet connections.

"I see critics in this city purporting to speak on behalf of citizens they don't represent," said Chris Sacca, the Google executive overseeing the project.

After a dozen community meetings, the sides in January hammered out a contract. EarthLink agreed to discuss with the city any changes in its privacy policy and to share 5% of the program's subscription fees with the city's digital divide program to use for computers, training and other equipment.

That hasn't satisfied everyone. Although the contract must be approved by July, the Board of Supervisors has yet to formally consider it. The board is exploring running its own Internet service with fiber optic cables that run through San Francisco.

"We don't need to give away our city," said Supervisor Jake McGoldrick. "We can do it ourselves."

To answer critics, Chris Vein, who's overseeing the project for the city, has opened his laptop, fired up a connection similar to the one proposed, played video for supervisors and chatted over an Internet phone service.

Even so, Vein said in an interview, "the project was originally put forth as a way to bridge the digital divide. We're not talking about downloading movies for free."

The first fight in a major city over municipal-backed wireless broadband started more than three years ago in Philadelphia. The foe there was not the tech-savvy citizenry but telephone and cable providers who were worried about having to compete with free plans. In other cities, fighting over who owns the light poles has hindered the installation of antennas.

Not every city's Wi-Fi effort has been greeted by griping. In Anaheim, EarthLink began offering a paid wireless service last summer and now covers 40% of the city, with the rest expected to be operating this fall. Anaheim has recorded only three complaints, two of which came from people who couldn't get access yet, said city spokesman John Nicoletti.

Even as it awaits a decision in San Francisco, Google has forged ahead with a wireless network in its hometown of Mountain View, 40 miles south of here. Two months after Google proposed the Wi-Fi plan, Sacca said, the City Council unanimously approved it. Tests began a few months later, and the service went live citywide in August.

There, one sunny afternoon last week, Red Rock Coffee was packed with people tapping at their laptop keyboards. They had several free Internet services from which to choose, including Google's, the cafe's and others operated by nearby businesses.


Student Daniel Aregai said he appreciated the free access that Mountain View provided. But another Web-surfing patron, entrepreneur Mike Simonsen, said cities shouldn't bother because most areas are already awash in wireless networks.

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"Individual businesses like this cafe do a marvelous job themselves," he said.

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Quinn reported from San Francisco, Granelli from Costa Mesa.

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