Some Want to Scrap the Old Infrastructure To Create a High-Tech, Wireless Region

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As crews rush to restore basic telephone and Internet services to areas ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, some executives, academics and analysts are urging a more ambitious approach: Make New Orleans and the surrounding areas super-connected communities, with advanced services that surpass what is available anywhere in the country, if not the world.

With many poles and wires reduced to sticks and spaghetti, cell towers down, miles of streets still flooded, and parts of the region uninhabitable for the near future, these experts see the perfect opportunity to deploy new systems that otherwise might be too expensive or disruptive to build.

The result, they say, could be a bonanza of higher technology at lower prices for businesses and consumers, more robust emergency-responder systems and an ability to provide high-speed Internet access to poorer segments of the population often left off of the information highway.

"The area ought to be a beacon for 21st-century communications in the United States," said Rey Ramsey, chief executive of One Economy Corp., a nonprofit organization that helps bring high-speed Internet service to inner-city communities. "We ought to go state of the art, and state of the art with a purpose."

Ramsey, who also is chairman of Habitat for Humanity International, said recreating New Orleans as a technology and communications mecca could be a key to its revival, drawing back shuttered businesses that are considering relocating and attracting new ones.

In addition, he said, "there needs to be an intentional effort to make sure that these benefits extend to poor people directly."

The Federal Communications Commission yesterday announced a series of steps and proposed funding to help get the region's system running again.

And a broad hurricane-relief bill being drafted by Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) would earmark money to help low- and middle-income residents and businesses buy or lease computers and get access to high-speed Internet access at affordable prices.

But for several executives and analysts in the telecommunications world, that would be just a small beginning, though they acknowledge that their ideas are best-case and might never be enacted.

Sky Dayton, who founded Internet provider EarthLink Inc. and more recently has focused on wireless ventures, said the area need not bother reconnecting all its downed lines and should instead rely on existing
cellular networks and additional systems known as WiFi and WiMax, which provide high-speed Internet access.

Dayton said the cost of such a network would be relatively low -- "a rounding error in the context of rebuilding a city." A series of small, electronic devices on top of buildings or lampposts and take signals from central towers and push them around to houses, offices or other "hot spots."

Such networks can also deliver Internet-based telephone service.

Several municipalities around the country have launched, or are considering building, government-owned or -operated wireless-Internet networks, so lower-income citizens can access the Internet more affordably. Those efforts have met with fierce opposition from the major telephone companies, which have successfully lobbied in several states for laws prohibiting governments from operating such networks if they compete with private industry.

Dayton, who heads a consortium between Earthlink and SK Telecom Co., a leading mobile-communications firm in South Korea, said municipal wireless-Internet networks should be public-private partnerships.

Jeffrey A. Citron, chief executive of Vonage Holdings Corp., a leading provider of Internet phone service, sees an opportunity built less around alternative technologies and more around opening up competition.

"I'd come up with a plan for a trenching system" for major thoroughfares in New Orleans while the city is largely empty and undergoing repairs, he said. High-speed, fiber-optic cables are hugely expensive to lay, so the dominant phone companies have typically been the only ones to do so.

Citron said the city could dig the trenches and make them available, for suitable fees to help cover construction costs, to any carrier that wanted to lay cables to provide services -- including voice, digital television and Internet access.

With more companies potentially competing, Citron said, prices would come down.

Bill Smith, chief technology officer for BellSouth Corp., the Gulf Coast's primary phone carrier, paused for several seconds when presented with this idea.

"I would say that might not make sense for us" if too many competitors meant the percentage of the pie for each was too low, he said.

Smith said BellSouth is committed to rebuilding with an eye toward providing state-of-the-art technology that is largely Internet-based.

The company hopes, for example, to one day let consumers set their home video recorders from their cell phones.

Alexander H. Good, chief executive of Mobile Satellite Ventures LP of Reston, said satellite technology, in addition to other systems, would provide a more disaster-proof communication system for emergency responders, including police, fire and medical personnel.

He said his company is readying two new satellites with new capabilities. Although the satellites service the entire country, they could be pointed to a particular area in an emergency to provided expanded service.
Anthony Townsend, research director at the Institute for the Future in California, pointed out that many of those high-flown ideas could run up against a fundamental problem: The services rely on electricity, which often goes out during such disasters. The nation must focus on finding more flexible ways of distributing power, he said.