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## Philadelphia to Be City of Wireless Web

By *Arshad Mohammed*  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Wednesday, October 5, 2005; Page D01

Philadelphia yesterday announced a plan to build the biggest municipal wireless Internet system in the nation, the latest of a growing number of cities to treat high-speed Web access as a basic municipal service like water, electricity and trash collection.

Philadelphia said Atlanta-based EarthLink Inc. will fund, build and manage the 135-square-mile network, which will offer low-income residents service for as little as about \$10 a month and could threaten the profits of telephone and cable companies.

"Increasingly, city officials view broadband in the 21st century the same way they viewed electricity 100 years ago and telephone service 50 years ago. It's falling into the category of a necessary and essential social service," said Ben Scott, policy director of Free Press, a nonprofit group that favors the development of municipal wireless.

"Cities see this as a way to spur economic growth: on the one hand to put tools in the hands of the underprivileged and give them a leg up, and on the other to provide incentives to small businesses to locate in these cities and to expand their operations," Scott said.

EarthLink expects to provide its service, which will offer speeds of 1 megabit per second for both uploading and downloading, for about \$20 a month to regular customers in Philadelphia, with discounts to be offered to low-income residents. It also hopes to make money by renting access to other Internet service providers and by



Computer users try out wireless connections in Philadelphia's Love Park at the launch ceremony for nonprofit group Wireless Philadelphia last year. (By Jacqueline Larma - Associated Press)

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EarthLink will compete against broadband service from Verizon Communications Inc., which offers introductory prices of \$14.95 a month for maximum download speeds of 768 kilobits per second and uploads of 128 kilobits per second.

Philadelphia's decision to move forward with the system will add fuel to the legal, legislative and public relations battle being waged by telephone and cable companies that argue that public money should not support competition with private firms.

Verizon said a sound business case should be made before allowing municipal-backed systems to compete with private providers. "The city is the steward of its resources. I am not going to tell it how to use them," said Link Hoewing, Verizon vice president for Internet and technology policy. But in Philadelphia, he said, "I think the market has done a good job of addressing the issue."

Seeking to address such concerns, EarthLink officials said that the company would pay the network's estimated \$10 million to \$15 million cost by itself.

According to Free Press, about 300 municipalities around the country are undertaking broadband experiments, but only a few dozen are doing full-scale networks like Philadelphia's. On Monday, San Francisco said 26 companies, including EarthLink, Google Inc. and Cingular Wireless LLC, had submitted proposals to build its planned wireless network, which will cover roughly 47 square miles.

In the Washington region, Alexandria has created a one-year pilot project for free wireless Internet access along seven blocks of King Street stretching to the Potomac River, but does not plan to offer the service to residents on a commercial basis.

Manassas is experimenting with another technology -- the delivery of broadband Internet service over power lines -- and plans to announce today that it has completed citywide commercial deployment of the system, according to Chantilly-based Communication Technologies Inc., which operates the system.

Dianah Neff, Philadelphia's chief information officer and the acting chairman of the Wireless Philadelphia nonprofit group, which is setting up the city's wireless network, said the city believed it had to find a way to get cheap broadband to residents, along with computers and training.

"If you were to ask the local telco, they would say, well, 90 percent of the city is covered. But if it's at a fee that people can't afford, if they don't have the computers and the skills to use them, having it there hasn't helped you overcome your digital divide," Neff said.

She said the service could also cut the city's communications costs by giving building inspectors, property assessors or repairmen access to information in the field rather than forcing them to return to offices.

Wireless Philadelphia and EarthLink plan to negotiate a formal

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contract in the next 60 days, and the company says it hopes to complete construction of the network, whose key elements are shoe-box-size radios that will sit atop street lights, by the end of next year.

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