New Orleans's New Connection

City-Owned WiFi System To Be Announced Today

By Jonathan Krim
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, November 29, 2005; D01

Hurricane-ravaged New Orleans will deploy the nation's first municipally owned wireless Internet system that will be free for all users, part of an effort to jump-start recovery by making living and doing business in the city as attractive as possible.

The system, which Mayor C. Ray Nagin is scheduled to announce at a news conference today, also will be used by law enforcement and for an array of city government functions, such as speeding approval of building permits.

Much of the equipment to run the network was donated by companies, but New Orleans will own it and operate all its components at the outset. The system, which uses devices mounted on streetlights to beam out fast Internet connections for wireless-enabled computers, is scheduled to be operational today in the central business district and the French Quarter and to be expanded over time.

"Now, with a single step, city departments, businesses and private citizens can access a tool that will help speed the rebuilding of New Orleans as a better, safer and stronger city," Nagin said in a statement. "This is how technology fuels collaboration, allowing our best ideas to come together so we can speak with one voice."

But the move probably will stir an already roiling national debate over whether it makes sense for localities to launch their own systems.

Cities around the country are studying or have deployed "wireless fidelity," or WiFi, networks, because they often provide more affordable Internet access than private carriers and can help bridge the digital divide in low-income areas or because high-speed Internet access is not provided by either telephone or cable companies.

Telephone and cable companies oppose the moves as unfair, taxpayer-funded competition and have successfully lobbied several states to prohibit or restrict the networks.

Louisiana is one of those states, prohibiting any locality from offering Internet connection speeds of more than 144 kilobits per second, about twice the speed of dial-up but one-tenth to one-twentieth of what is typically provided via digital subscriber line (DSL) or cable-modem services.

The New Orleans system will feature 512-kilobit-per-second speed, which city officials said is the most the network can handle efficiently at first. Because the city is under a state of emergency, it can skirt existing law.

Eventually, city officials said, they expect to outsource operation of the commercial side of the network to a private company, as municipalities such as Philadelphia are doing. Philadelphia charges users a monthly fee.

But they have little patience for what they see as efforts by telecommunications companies to restrict their ability to determine their own Internet future. For them, moving to a permanent wireless system is a matter of survival for a city whose future remains uncertain.

"My number-one job is to restimulate the economy," said Greg Meffert, a deputy mayor, the city's chief technology officer and a former tech company entrepreneur. The system, he said, "is going to be the backbone of a brand new, never fully tried set of technology visions" to help distinguish New Orleans from other large cities.

Already, WiFi communications for government services are helping the city speed its recovery. The biggest benefit, Meffert said, has been enabling building inspectors to quickly process paperwork for reconstruction permits without having to travel back and forth to city offices.

Moreover, Meffert said the hurricane provided valuable lessons on the ability of traditional, wired telecommunications systems to withstand natural disasters.

"I know what failed," Meffert said. "Staying with the status quo would be the single most reckless thing I could do. . . . If I put it back the same way that it was, people should fire me before I finish."

City officials said they will battle to overturn the 144-kilobit speed limitation that will take effect when the state of emergency is over.

"It's the blessing of this tragedy," Meffert said. "It's harder to win the been-here-forever vendor argument. Either we do this, or we die."

Chris Drake, operations manager for New Orleans, said the system also proves invaluable for law enforcement. Although first responders will still communicate over a radio-band network, background data checks and other police functions can be done on the WiFi network, relieving pressure on the radio system.

Before the hurricane, city government already had moved to a voice-over-Internet system to save money. And it had deployed a new-generation, wireless "mesh" network for anti-crime surveillance cameras in parts of the city.

The broader WiFi system is an expansion of that network, using equipment from Silicon Valley-based Tropos Networks Inc.

The system uses shoebox-sized devices mounted on streetlight posts to provide the wireless coverage. Some of the devices also beam the signal to existing fiber-optic trunk lines that connect the city to the Internet backbone. About 20 to 25 units are necessary to cover one square mile.

After the hurricane, Tropos donated 50 more units to the city and Intel Corp. paid for an additional 50 units, bringing the total in the city to roughly 200.

"We donated the equipment because good friends of ours were hit really hard," said Ellen Kirk, Tropos vice president for marketing.

Devices also were installed to serve specific locations, such as disaster shelters and cruise ships housing displaced residents.

She said the only previously deployed units damaged during the hurricane were those in which the light pole was knocked down. Backup power quickly restored all the other devices to service.

Paul Butcher, Intel's marketing manager for state and local governments, said the future of communication is wireless.

"The language has changed from two years ago," he said. "The value is in the mobile worker."