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Wireless networks don't click with some

Telecom bill would ban free Internet access like that in model East End program

By ERIC BERGER

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[Hobby gains WiFi status](#)

Will Reed envisions a mouse in every house — computers, that is — and high-speed Internet connections for all. A wired community, he says, is an empowered one.

From his nonprofit group's East End offices, Reed is turning his vision into a reality. Although Pecan Park neighborhood residents may not realize it, e-mail, pictures and commerce now zip above their tree-lined streets. This high-speed, wireless Internet access is free for the taking.

Reed's organization, Technology for All, has pioneered this program to bridge the digital divide with help from Rice University and an enthusiastic Mayor Bill White, who has asked city libraries to join the effort. This small, wired neighborhood may eventually become a model for providing everyone in the city free, or low-cost, Internet access.

Or not.

Rep. Phil King, R-Weatherford, has filed a massive telecommunications bill in Austin this session that, in part, bans Texas cities from participating in wireless information

networks.

"I'm not real pleased," Reed said. "As it currently stands, the bill eliminates competition, innovation and a huge research opportunity."

Several telecommunications companies, which provide both dial-up Internet access as well as faster broadband connections through cable and DSL lines, say they were not involved in writing the bill.

That's not to say they disagree with the wireless provision. SBC Communications, which has more DSL customers in the nation than any other provider, said cities should be allowed to offer wireless Internet access in public places, such as parks and libraries. But they should not directly compete with private enterprises by providing services to residents and businesses, said company spokesman Gene Acuña.

"If they do, then we would have some real concerns," he said.

Other cities considering

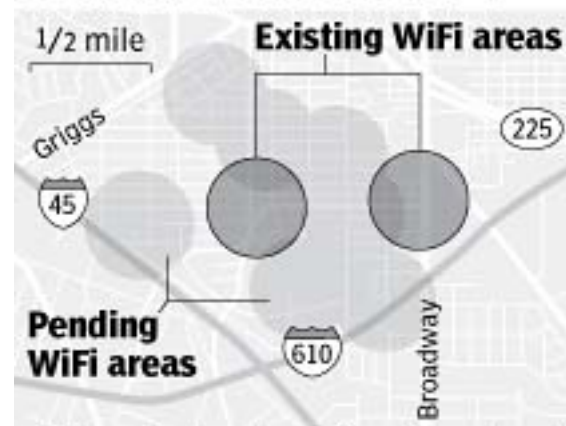
Houston, which also is considering ideas such as putting Internet antennas on parking meters, is not alone in exploring wireless Internet. Philadelphia has said it will offer free, citywide access. Los Angeles and San Francisco also are studying how to do the same thing. In Texas, small towns such as Linden and Granbury have experimented with wireless networks, as have larger cities such as Austin and Corpus Christi.

The catalyst has been an explosion of innovations in technology — from antennas to modem-like devices — that allow personal computers to capture signals from the air. This has driven down costs.

Telecommunications companies have taken notice as cities, nonprofit organizations and startup companies have begun using these technologies to offer free or steeply reduced Internet access, said Bill Gurley, a Silicon Valley-based venture capitalist with Benchmark Capital who closely follows the issue.

Legislators in a dozen states, including Texas, have filed bills to remove competition for telecommunications companies, he said. Most are pending, but an Indiana effort failed, while a similar law in Pennsylvania passed, although it omitted Philadelphia because of that city's existing efforts.

SPREADING THE NET



■ **Who:** Technology for All, a local nonprofit group that seeks to empower poorer communities, has joined the city of Houston and Rice University to provide free, high-speed wireless Internet to East End residents.

■ **Why:** Providing Internet access, social scientists say, is perhaps the single biggest thing cities can do to close the gap between information-age haves and have-nots.

■ **Why not:** A Texas legislator, Rep. Phil King, R-Weatherford, has filed a bill seeking to prevent cities from providing or supporting wireless Internet access. Some companies selling Internet access say that having the government give the service away is unfair competition.

Source: Technology For All

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"These are very disruptive, low-cost technologies, and it's not in the incumbent telecommunication companies' best interest to embrace them," Gurley said. "But these are technologies that can be very beneficial to communities."

King's chief of staff, Trey Trainor, said they are rewriting the telecommunications bill to recognize that there are legitimate uses for municipal networks, such as public safety communication, meter-reading and other city services. King's basic objection, Trainor said, stands — in a free-market system it's not acceptable to let public government compete with private businesses.

As the public-private fight heats up in Austin, Francisca de Leon and her family are, for the first time, enjoying Internet access in their East End home.

With the e-mail address for an older daughter in California taped to the monitor, de Leon uses the computer to keep in touch with family. Another daughter, Janet, a Milby High School senior, uses the computer for instant messaging and college searches. "My children use this much more than me," de Leon admitted.

Melissa Noriega, the acting state representative for the area covered by Technology for All, called the effort to ban municipal participation in wireless Internet efforts "short-sighted," and said she will work to prevent it from becoming law.

Noriega said families that cannot speak fluent English can be transformed by learning to use a computer and crossing the digital divide — they learn how to spell-check, can find translation services online, e-mail family in their home countries, and much more.

"This may be the single biggest step we can take to close the gap between the haves and have-nots," she said.

Signal beamed to library

Technology for All's plan works by transmitting its fiber-optic Internet connection from a large antenna on its offices. The organization beams the signal directly to Melcher Library, about two-thirds of a mile away. Residents within a few hundred yards of either spot can pick up signals now.

Within a month or two, Reed says, several residents, as well as a YMCA and other organizations, have agreed to install antennas to spread access across the entire neighborhood.

Residents can sign up at the library for in-home access. Technology for All provides free computers to high school students who take a computer course, but is looking for a sponsor to help provide \$125 modems that plug into computers and capture the wireless signal.

The fledgling network offers Rice engineers and students a real-life environment to test the optimal placement of antennas, and how to maximize access speed while minimizing needed equipment. This research is funded with a five-year, \$2.5 million National Science Foundation grant to develop the next generation of technology, with the eventual goal of beaming Internet connections 250 times the speed of DSL or cable into 100 million homes.

"This is a step toward that goal," said Ed Knightly, a Rice engineer leading the research project. "In this case, we're pushing as much bandwidth as we can achieve per square mile for the lowest cost. It's inspiring to see our research get directly into the community."

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