

## D.C. aims to go wireless citywide

July 5 2006

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The spread of wireless access throughout the entire D.C. metro area is under way. The nation's capital has always had the infrastructure for this sort of project but hasn't taken advantage of the capabilities, according to Oscar Rodriguez, director of innovation and reform for the Washington government.

While the city is still grappling with how to take advantage of its resources, cities such as Alexandria, Va., have already experimented with the use of widespread wireless.

Craig Fifer, e-government manager for Alexandria, discussed the development that had taken place in terms of wireless access for the public. According to Fifer, they explored the use of free wireless access in about a 16-block area. After a yearlong pilot, citywide wireless access was proposed.

Ten solid bids were proposed for this project, which Fifer described as "very encouraging." He added that the goals of this project initially were to establish convenience, uniqueness, higher technology and a foundation of experimentation for future wireless endeavors.

One key part of the initiative in Alexandria is that the government won't install, maintain or operate the system but rather the private sector will. Fifer said that the government would be an innovator and supporter but not a competitor, pointing out that under this system the price of the Internet would be reduced for lower-income families and that all high school students would be provided with laptops, which would connect

them back to the school network.

"This is a win-win-win model," Fifer said. "It is the starting point for a model that will be very successful."

There is no single solution to meeting local needs to get wired, though. Each community has its own specific needs, they think they're the center of the universe, said Rodriguez.

Rizwah Khaliq, global business executive of Digital Communities, further acknowledged the obstacles that lay ahead.

"The government doesn't want to appear to be a competitor, this could cause a backlash," he said. "The perception is different than the reality."

With regards to legal exposure, Khaliq pointed out that the issue needed to be addressed in a realistic way. For instance, certain measures need to be taken to protect against child predators.

Paul Withington, communications system capture manager for Lockheed Martin, further spoke on the challenges by focusing on homeland security.

Various stakeholders with different perspectives, a spectrum of technology to choose from, evolving threats, and timing are just a few of the concerns that Withington addressed. Budget also posed a major predicament according to Withington.

He pointed out that in order to protect a community, a bulletproof system needs to be created but they're expensive and require a huge amount of analysis.

"Things are getting more complex," said Withington. "We need to force

standards to be enforced."

However, according to the panelists, the implementation of wireless for public safety is crucial.

"Wireless is one of the key elements for public safety," said Khaliq.

Despite the challenges presented in establishing an efficient widespread wireless access system, there are motivations, which continue to encourage experts.

Fifer explained the advantages for individuals including quality education. Reduced phone company costs would also intrigue the individual.

Steve Stroh, vice president of marketing for the CONXX Inc., explained his desire to cut phone companies out of the mix.

"We're sick of dealing with the hassle and expense of phone companies," said Stroh.

Rodriguez further pointed out that in the long run money would be saved if the phone bill were cut. In regard to pursuing the project, Rodriguez also said that there is no other option.

"It is not only a good idea," said Rodriguez. "We were forced into this situation."

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