

Google project's success is up to Kansas City

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Kansas City, beware the story of Vilnius.

Few if any cities in the world can rival the network of [fiber optic cables](#) snaking [high-speed Internet](#) through the Lithuanian capital. And yet Vilnius is no tech innovation capital.

There's a warning in that example, suggest the authors of a recent report, for Kansas City as it sits on the cusp of Google Inc. rolling out an ultra-high-speed network here.

"The burden is on us as a community to make something out of it," said Mike Burke, a co-chairman of the Mayors' Bi-state Innovation Team.

The group is candid in saying it has yet to identify a killer application springing from Google's promised service that requires the blinding one-gigabit-per-second speeds the Internet search behemoth says it will bring to homes.

Still, the committee's report argues that interest and excitement stirred by Google's plans give the metro area a catalyst for finding ways to bolster quality of life in myriad ways by harnessing the power of the Internet.

In its "playbook" for Kansas City's digital future, the ad hoc panel urges forming a new quasi-public organization so that, in the words of co-chairman Ray Daniels, somebody "gets up every day and says, 'How are we going to use high-speed fiber?' "

Setting up what the report calls a "digital leadership network" would mark just the first investment to leverage the coming service from Google. Doing so likely would require a few hundred thousand dollars from local government to get off the ground and hopefully corporate support later.

Later, the bi-state team suggests, the Kansas City area will need to spend more money making Internet access as common as indoor plumbing. It suggests piecing together Wi-Fi networks in certain business districts, along transit corridors and springing from libraries, community centers and schools.

More than two years ago Google announced that it would go to some mid-sized U.S. city and establish the fastest of consumer Internet networks by stringing fiber optic cables directly to homes. Last spring, the search giant picked Kansas City, Kan., from 1,100-plus communities that lobbied to be Google guinea pigs. About a month later, Google said it would include Kansas City, Mo., in its network.

Originally, Google said it would be lighting up service in early 2012 to some neighborhoods. That schedule has slipped, and the company now says it will have a major announcement this summer.

The company has not yet said how much it will charge for Internet service, other than to suggest the cost could be comparable to conventional broadband, which averages a speed 100 times slower. Various licenses the company has acquired hint that it could be bundled with a cable-like pay TV package - something analysts see as key to luring customers from their existing broadband bundles.

And even Google has conceded it's not identifying any particular application certain to come from making fat-pipe Internet hook-ups routine.

"We ... can't wait to see how the Kansas City community will take advantage of gigabit speeds," a Google spokeswoman said last week.

The company is curious what novel uses consumers and businesses will dream up. There have been no concrete plans yet to transform whatever Google brings into a local economic boom or to make day-to-day life dramatically different.

That, contends last week's report, puts pressure on Kansas City to find game-changing uses for the Internet - whether it's the light-speed version expected from [Google](#) or conventional broadband offered by Time Warner Cable, Comcast and SureWest Communications.

"High-speed fiber, by itself, is no guarantee of leadership in innovation or economic development," the report states. "It's about sociology, not technology."

The Mayor's Bi-state Innovation Team was created by Wyandotte County (Kan.) Unified Government Mayor Joe Reardon and Kansas City, Mo., Mayor Sly James to generate ways to make the most of Google's bet on Kansas City.

The panel describes its report as being in "beta" form with a final version coming soon. Still, it does suggest a handful of things the "digital leadership network" could promote:

- Telemedicine. The panel wants to kick off pilot programs encouraging health insurance companies to reimburse doctors, clinics or hospitals for remote care. Typically, insurance firms will only reimburse caregivers for office visits. The report champions the idea of saving money by allowing charges for remote monitoring of diabetes or Alzheimer's patients.

That could make care more convenient, and possibly lower costs such as transporting nursing home residents to a hospital or doctor's office.

-Universal Internet access. The report suggests setting up sundry Wi-Fi networks to serve poor neighborhoods where residents often can't afford monthly Internet service subscriptions.

"If digital inclusion - making technology accessible to everyone - is not the first plank in the community's digital platform, the opportunity for true transformation will be constricted, if not lost entirely," the report states. "Those who don't have Internet access are isolated from many of the opportunities their friends and neighbors have."

-Demonstrations. Model homes and business incubators should be pieced together for public displays so more consumers and businesses could wrap their heads around the possibilities that might come with ultra-fast Internet speeds.

-Education. The committee said pre-school educators who often work remotely could draw special benefits from ongoing education made easier by online videos and lesson plans. It also suggested pilot demonstrations in kindergarten through high school classes to make teachers and administrators better aware of ways to use the breadth of the Internet. And the report imagines a role for libraries as a conduit for distance learning over the Internet.

-Arts. The report suggests hosting online arts festivals, using mega-broadband connections to foster online collaboration of art projects and using increased connectivity to promote the Kansas City arts scene.

"The Kansas City region has a brief window in time, before high-speed Internet is universally available, to establish a leadership position in using high-speed Internet access to drive economic, social and cultural

growth," the report states.

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