

NYC bringing wireless Internet to pay phone kiosks (Update)

July 11 2012, by FAY ABUEL GASIM

(AP) — New Yorkers have been making fewer and fewer calls on the city's 12,000 pay phones, yet the kiosks will likely be getting heavier use soon.

The city announced Wednesday a pilot program that has converted 10 kiosks in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens into free Wi-Fi Internet hotspots. The plan is to expand the program to all 12,000 pay phones in the city.

"We are taking an existing infrastructure and leveraging it up to provide more access to information," said Rahul Merchant, the city's chief information officer, at a kiosk located at Broadway and 58th Street.

Merchant said the program is part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's effort to help New Yorkers and the 50 million people who visit the city each year stay connected.

The pay phones remain, but a router is installed at each kiosk. The Internet signal extends a couple of hundred feet, Merchant said.

Users simply approach the kiosk with an Internet device and log on. No password is needed. They can connect for as long as they need, 24 hours a day.

Merchant said the city's plan is not to remove pay phones, but to improve them. The Van Wagner and Titan outdoor advertising

companies, which own more than 9,000 kiosks combined, are working with the city to add the hotspot devices and are paying about \$2,000 for each setup, said Peter Izzo, Van Wagner's senior operations executive.

"With cellphone companies limiting 3G and 4G access, we saw a growing need for free Wi-Fi," Izzo said.

Cellphones have been driving down pay phone use for years, but Izzo said there were 25 million pay phone calls made in New York City last year.

Izzo said the companies hope traffic to the hot spots — and the advertising there — will generate more advertising profit.

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