Google Fiber experiment draws would-be Web entrepreneurs

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Mike Demarais, who is 20, arrived from Boston to the Kansas City area's first "fiberhood" with his MacBook, some clothes and an idea.

Call him a homesteader on the Silicon Prairie.

His idea is, well, hard to explain - as often is the case for Internet entrepreneurs drawn to the ultra-speed promise of Google Fiber, soon to be providing next-generation Web and TV service to the Hanover Heights neighborhood.

Suffice it to say Demarais is convinced his little Web-based startup could revolutionize manufacturing, customize products such as clothing to each consumer's likes, and make assembly lines as we know them obsolete.

At least for the time being, while he massages this idea into something possible, Demarais has an affordable place to hang - in a house that should be pulsing, any day now, with a second-to-none gigabit connection.

"This is all I need," said Demarais, tapping the lid of his laptop on the coffee table.

He lives here for free - thanks to a local Web designer doing his part to make the region a magnet for gig-hungry geeks of the entrepreneurial variety.

Across this region, civic and government leaders, development groups, colleges, foundations and task forces are rolling out grand plans to capitalize on the first-in-the-nation Google Fiber hype. But the actual doing has begun a half-dozen houses down the street from the modest digs Demarais moved into this month.

Online startups with names that pop - FormZapper, EyeVerify, SquareOffs, Leap2 and LocalRuckus - are clustering in the Hanover Heights area of Kansas City, Kan., creating what's called the KC Startup Village.

As white Google Fiber vans crawl down residential roads to hook up houses, an aging district once dominated by antique shops, salons, bars and boutiques is becoming a humble nativity for Kansas City's fledgling entrepreneurial class.

Or so the community hopes.

Those leading the effort envision a metro where doctors can peer into your son's aching ear as he sits miles away at a home computer.

A place where video gamers move in just to smite their enemies at unmatched speeds. Where high-tech products are developed and launched from the banks of Brush Creek or the bluffs above the Kaw River - Silicon Prairie, they're calling it.

"The challenge is in tying all of these possibilities into a coherent story line - one that says Kansas City is serious about next-generation technology," said Aaron Deacon, selected by the Mid-America Regional Council to direct a push called KC Digital Drive.

Deacon pitched the Kansas City story line last week to Istanbul, Turkey, where he was invited to give a talk. About 30 members of the Turkish

media quizzed him about Google Fiber.

"It can get kind of comical," he told the Kansas City Star.

"There are all these people, and all these cities, who believe they have the next big idea. But the only value comes when it gets created, when it happens."

In the fiberhood, a Google-defined district of potential customers for the search giant's Internet connections, Ben Barreth is trying his best to make it happen.

Barreth, a local Web developer, drew cash from his IRA and took out a mortgage on a $48,000 house for budding entrepreneurs, including Demarais, to live in rent-free for three months.

A wild impulse, Barreth admits. Two months ago, when he raised the idea to his wife, "both of us just busted out laughing."

A home for hackers, Barreth dubbed it - heck, he'd even cover utility costs.

(To the most gifted of geeks, the term "hacker" means nothing deviant. It applies to anyone willing to spend all night immersed in computer coding - for creative purposes, not illegal ones.)

"We want to be an innovative city? Let's make it easier for these young people to move here and start a business," said Barreth. He attributed part of his thinking to being a devout Christian, striving to do good, though he acknowledged:

"There's a cool factor. I'm really pumped about fiber."

The fiber being installed around Hanover Heights should make Demarais' laptop operate a little smoother. But he could have stayed in Boston, where his partner in the startup plan remains. Or he could have plunged into debt trying to launch a business in the Silicon Valley.

He thought of going to Chile, known for its broad incentive programs for startups. Then he stumbled upon Barreth's blog, urging Kansas Citians with spare bedrooms or empty basements to make "Homes for Hackers." (Go to homesforhackers.com for details.)

"This allows me to not have to raise money right away," Demarais said. "We still have a lot of work to do in developing our idea. ...

"But I don't have to work all day at Starbucks just to survive."

He hopes the tight-knit culture of Kansas City's techies, all buzzing about Google, will help him network and approach potential investors more directly than he could have in places better known as high-tech breeding grounds.

In the Boston area, where Facebook was born, "it's too noisy," Demarais said. Venture capitalists are swarmed by college students angling to launch "me-too companies ... It's like, 'We're the new Pinterest, but specifically for football.' "

Remember, this kid is out to revolutionize manufacturing.

It might not be so easy. Local entrepreneurs have long complained about access to private investors and the biases tech journals harbor against flyover country.

In May, the Mayors' Bistate Innovation Team, co-chaired by former mayoral candidate Mike Burke and Kansas City, Kan., school

Superintendent Ray Daniels, issued a 37-page "playbook" for utilizing Google Fiber.

As these reports tend to go, the language was heavy on terms such as "America's Digital Crossroads" and "metropolitan Internet ecosystem," but light on how it all gets funded.

Beyond citing practical ways to improve life in Kansas City - such as threading super-speed connections through schools and libraries - the planners threw everything at the wall in hopes of drawing the notice of outside corporations, trade associations, researchers and grant-givers.

The possibilities outlined in the playbook include:

-"Digital Arts." Ultra-speed fiber, when strung beyond Kansas City, may allow performing arts centers in far-off locations to present concerts and plays jointly - sharing audio and video in perfect sync.

-"House of the Future." The mayors' team imagined this place to be a gigabit-connected demonstration home, stocked by whiz-bang product vendors, to help residents, homebuilders and real-estate agents understand how we might live tomorrow.

"Who would've thought five years ago that you could ask your phone a question and get an answer?" said Burke.

In Burke's mind's eye, future home dwellers will talk to their houses and the houses will talk back.

Tell your house to turn up the heat, and the house might say, "It will be 71 degrees in five minutes," or "Your furnace filter needs changing."

-"Telehealth Pilot." The higher the Internet bandwidth, the easier for

physicians from their offices to diagnose patients at home, said Steve Fennel, director of medical informatics at the University of Kansas Medical Center.

"It's already being done," Fennel said, "but not to the extent it could be."

Questions surrounding the costs and insurance coverage of office-to-home examinations are unsettled, and many doctors would insist on face-to-face visits regardless of the convenience the technology offers patients.

But for willing physicians, fiber connections would carry remote images so sharp, "you can see all the little follicles," Fennel said.

-"Online Gaming Development." Video game vendors, developers and players "will be attracted to the availability of reasonably priced high-speed fiber (and) the presence of creative talent in the community," the mayors' playbook predicts.

Would legions of gamers locate here just to perfect their skills at "Call of Duty"?

"The experts tell me yes," Burke said.

Several ideas to attract innovators and entrepreneurs already are off the launch pad.

Local leaders, along with Deacon of KC Digital Drive, have sat in on three virtual meetings to chat technology with officials from Singapore, Moscow and other cities. Using high-bandwidth "TelePresence Rooms" developed by Cisco, all painted the same color and wired with high-resolution screens, they say audio lag time vanishes and they feel that everyone is at the same table.

At the Kauffman Labs for Enterprise Creation, a weekly program called "1 Million Cups" brings together dozens of wannabe entrepreneurs, business advisors and self-proclaimed "hackers" (the good kind, honest) to present and comment on new ideas.

The University of Missouri-Kansas City - having secured a $1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce, plus help from the state of Missouri and area businesses - soon will take applications for a "Digital Sandbox" that would help techies develop and test their ideas.

"All innovators know the point called the Valley of Death, where they have an idea but it can't be proven to work," said Maria Meyers of the UM-Kansas City Innovation Center. "Then it's not going to go anywhere."

In the Digital Sandbox, they can present their ideas, "and if it's a strong candidate ... we'll put around that idea the right people and talent to move it forward," Myers said.

At EyeVerify, engineer Jeremy Paben held his smartphone close to his right eye and snapped a photo of the veins.

The screen on his phone in seconds flashed: Verified!

The startup company doesn't need Google Fiber to do what Paben's phone just did. But EyeVerify, founded in January, recently moved into the KC Startup Village so its team of four "could be among like-minded people trying to advance the ball," said founder Toby Rush.

Rather than cling to trade secrets, the young entrepreneurs of the village share tips and trade contacts.

EyeVerify, which uses digital biometrics to confirm a user's identity,

already has discussed a potential partnership with the new caddy-corner tenant, FormZapper.

FormZapper's founder, Andy Kallenbach, foresees a day when everyone can fill out secured documents, such as medical histories, online via FormZapper.com. Might a retinal scan be worked into the most confidential of documents traveling the Web?

"It helps for us to share information," said Mike Farmer of the startup upstairs, Leap2, which is developing software to speed mobile Web searches. "To do this you have to go through a number of different domains - financing, graphic design, marketing. It helps to have people around you who can say, 'Been there, done that.' "

A Colorado musician, Synthia Payne, said she was eyeing a move to the Startup Village in the coming weeks. Gigabit hookups would allow Payne to roll out an online subscription service for groups to participate in live music sessions without leaving their homes, she said.

"At this point, I've got to be in Kansas City do that," said Payne. She has contacted Barreth to inquire about his free Home for Hackers.

Just a week into his housing offer, Barreth was learning more about the cost of it. An electrician gazed into the breaker box in the basement to shoot Barreth a bid for bringing the house's circuitry up to the 100 amperes needed to juice the laptops.

Maybe $2,500.

"That's nothing compared to the foundation work," Barreth said.

Life is full of risk in KC Startup Village. No government money or tax breaks go to businesses for locating there.

To ease the strains, the [startup](#) LocalRuckus - connecting Web users to area events and attractions - keeps the office refrigerator packed with cheap beer.

The village "is almost a fraternity ... very much its own support system," said LocalRuckus co-founder Adam Arredondo, 28. "I'm pumped when Andy (Kallenbach, of FormZapper,) makes a sale."

"Every one of us," he grinned, "knows how freaking impossible all this is."

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