

Concerns raised as LA looks to Google Web services

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Google logo

(AP) -- Security and privacy concerns have been raised over a multimillion-dollar proposal by Los Angeles to tap Google Inc.'s Internet-based services for government e-mail, police records and other confidential data.

At issue is the security of computerized records on everything from police investigations to potholes as the nation's second-largest city considers dumping its in-house computer network for Google e-mail and office programs that are accessed over the Internet.

Paul Weber, president of the Los Angeles Police Protective League, complained Thursday that the union had scant information on the plan or what it would mean for the safety of sensitive records, such as narcotics or gang investigations.

His worries came just one day after the online-messaging service Twitter acknowledged hackers were able to access confidential information stored with Google, which has been promoting greater use of "cloud computing" - storing data online rather than on individual computers under a company's or government agency's direct control.

The shift toward doing more over the Web could make it much easier for hackers to gain access to corporate or government files. No longer would someone need to try to break through layers of security firewalls. As various personal and work accounts become increasingly linked together, all one needs is a single password to access documents just like a regular employee.

In the Twitter case, a hacker got the password for an employee's personal e-mail account - possibly by guessing, or by correctly answering a security question - and worked from there to steal confidential company documents.

Weber said the Los Angeles proposal could increase the exposure to computer hacking.

"Any time you go to a Web-based system, that puts you just a little further out than you were before," he said. "Drug cartels would pay any sum of money to be aware of our progress on investigations."

City Councilman Tony Cardenas, who heads a committee that will discuss the proposed contract next week, said he has a "laundry list of questions that need to be answered."

"While legitimate concerns have been raised by LAPD (Police Department) and the City Attorney's Office because of the nature of their work, we must find a solution that meets everyone's needs," Cardenas said in a statement. "We can't say we are a first-class city and

keep the same antiquated communication systems."

City officials are negotiating a potential \$7.2 million deal with contractor Computer Sciences Corp. to replace the city's computer system.

An analysis by the city administrative officer notes that Los Angeles' e-mail and office programs are now owned and operated by the city. Under the proposed plan, government e-mail, documents and data would be accessed over the Internet "and housed at Google's facilities," according to the analysis.

Computer Sciences representatives did not immediately return e-mail messages Thursday and Friday.

If approved, Los Angeles would be the second major city after Washington, D.C., to use Google's Internet-based services, known as Google Apps. The company has been promoting the package to other government agencies, too, as a way to cut costs and ensure access to Google-developed technical innovations.

Google said in a statement that more than 1.75 million businesses use the technology. An unknown number of them pay the Mountain View-based company \$50 per user per year for a premium version designed for businesses, government agencies and other robust needs.

In a statement, [Google](#) said its services, which can store information at a number of Google-run data centers around the world, are "extremely reliable, safe and secure."

It's not yet clear how existing federal and state privacy laws apply to data sent to computers outside a government agency's direct control.

Pam Dixon, executive director of the nonprofit research group World

Privacy Forum, said in a letter to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa Thursday that Los Angeles "rushed into this without enough careful consideration of all of the consequences, and without enough attention to the details of protecting the privacy of the data."

"The transfer of so many city records ... may threaten the privacy rights of city residents, undermine the security of other sensitive information, violate both state and federal laws, and potentially damage vital city legal and other interests," Dixon wrote.

Matt Szabo, a spokesman for the mayor, said the privacy and security of sensitive information "will be of paramount concern as the city moves forward to upgrade its inefficient, 20th century network. Upgrading our system will save money and allow for more rapid and efficient service to L.A. residents."

AP Technology Writer Joelle Tessler in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

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