

Downtown prepares to get hooked up

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • November 10, 2010

Plans are under way to blanket the downtown Battle Creek with wireless Internet service that would be free to visitors and occasional users.

The Wi-Fi service is scheduled to be up and running by late winter or early spring.

Battle Creek's Julie Clement, 25, said Tuesday it would be nice to know she could connect to the Internet on her cell phone or laptop while spending time with her son at a downtown park. Currently only private businesses such as the Griffin Grill and Pub offer free Wi-Fi downtown.

"It would be very convenient not to have to search it out," she said.

Outdoor Wi-Fi service was a top public request to be included in Battle Creek's downtown revitalization plan. It's an amenity that will help make the downtown more attractive to visitors and workers, said Cheryl Beard, Battle Creek Unlimited technology and marketing director. BCU, the city's economic developer, is leading the two-year-old downtown transformation.

City officials are working to identify utility poles and traffic signal masts where the Wi-Fi devices can be attached, said Jim Ritsema, Battle Creek assistant city manager. The devices would link into the downtown's fiber optic loop.

Coverage would center on designated hotspots in parks and public spaces, some of which have yet to be determined because of the ongoing revitalization plan, he said. No general fund taxpayer dollars will be used to set up the network.

The installation cost will rest largely on the provider, Lansing-based ACD.net, with city support to access its infrastructure. The company would recoup its costs through monthly subscription fees to regular users.

BCU had formed an evaluation team to select a Wi-Fi service provider, Beard said. ACD.net was one of three or four providers to express interest in the downtown project.

It is the same company that installed Wi-Fi coverage in Springfield between 2007 and 2009 with a \$750,000 federal grant.

And while Battle Creek does not qualify for the grant, ACD.net offered a custom package that best fits the city's request, Beard said.

BCU had originally planned to cover Battle Creek's downtown and some neighborhoods by summer of this year. The goal had been to offer it in neighborhoods where people could benefit from online education in their homes, Beard said.

But the project was delayed for several reasons: ACD.net was busy finishing its Wi-Fi network in Springfield before the grant period expired, Beard said. As well, technology improvements necessitated other changes. The plan also was scaled back to cover only the downtown area.

Kevin Schoen, president of ACD.net, said his company is being prudent in first setting up a network downtown where it expects to find about 100 to 200 paying customers.

"The hope is to hit the downtown corridor and expand into additional areas as the time goes on," he said. "We are making our investments wisely and carefully."

Casual users and visitors downtown would be able to sign up with a user log-in to access the Internet free through ACD.net, he said.

Daily users and businesses downtown would pay an

initial rate of \$19.95 per month for the slowest connection, he said. Speeds of one to 10 megabits would be offered.

Schoen said the future costs of connectivity will depend on how many people sign up for the service.

People who now access free Wi-Fi through downtown businesses said they would welcome the blanket coverage.

Dave Frambach, 55, was visiting the city Tuesday representing a supplier to Kellogg Co. He and a colleague were working in McCamly Plaza where they had access to Pastrami Joe's free Wi-Fi.

"As a visitor, I would enjoy the access if it was free," he said. "And if it's a nominal fee that would be all right with me, too."

His co-worker, Portage's Bruce Johnston, 44, said as a parent he would appreciate knowing his children had easy access to the Internet.

"It would make me feel more comfortable as a parent knowing I could reach them at any time," he said.

Schoen said ACD.net users will have to be at least 18 years old and agree to their terms of service to sign up, although he admitted it's based on the honor system. Parents will have the option to allow their underage children access through their account.

The service provider does not filter content any more than businesses offering free Wi-Fi do, he said.

"We're a railroad to get people to the Internet," he said. "We're not the crossing guards."

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