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Business

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Wireless Net access will help the poor in Phila. log on.

By Miriam Hill
 INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The grand experiment is about to begin.

Philadelphia's push to become the country's first major city with free, or at least cheap, wireless Internet connections, takes a big step forward this month as EarthLink Inc. completes a 15-square-mile test area. "So far, it seems to be going very, very well," said Terry Phillis, the city's acting technology chief.

When Mayor Street announced plans for the system in September 2004, he said a wireless-fidelity network, or Wi-Fi, would enhance the city's reputation as a technological trend-setter and help to bridge the "digital divide" between those who can afford Internet access and those who can't.

The test area, known as the "Proof of Concept," stretches from North Philadelphia south to the edge of Chinatown and from the Delaware River to parts of Strawberry Mansion and Hunting Park. Once the network is completed at the end of this month, a group of more than 50 testers from EarthLink and from Phillis' office will fan out with computers to make sure the network, customer service, and other parts of the operation are working.

Service is free in places. Clients with low incomes pay \$9.95 a month; others, \$21.95.

Testing should take about a month, said Clifton Roscoe, general manager for EarthLink Municipal Networks in Philadelphia.

EarthLink workers have hung about 750 signal boxes in the test area. The entire project will blanket all of Philadelphia's 135 square miles and require up to 5,000 signal boxes. It is expected to be completed in the third quarter of 2007.

Customers can expect download and upload speeds of about 1 megabyte per second. That's a fraction of the wired speeds offered by Comcast and Verizon, but it's also a fraction of the cost.

Service will be free in some areas, including LOVE Park and the Independence Visitors Center. Low-income clients can sign up for \$9.95 a month, compared to \$21.95 for other customers.

A household becomes eligible for the lower rate if it either already receives certain benefits such as Medicaid, food stamps, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or earns no more than 130 percent of the federal poverty level.

Under those guidelines, a single person could earn no more than \$12,441. A household of eight people could earn no more than \$42,107, according to Wireless Philadelphia, the nonprofit working with EarthLink.

Wireless Philadelphia aims to narrow the digital divide, a gap that exists because poor people often can't afford access to the Internet and other technologies.

Wireless Philadelphia is a new organization. See **WIFI** on E6

Bridging the digital gap

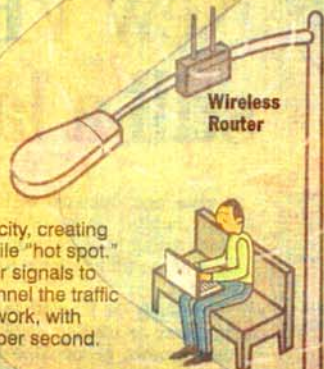
Wi-Fi Citywide

In an attempt to provide high-speed Internet access to many low-income residents, Philadelphia will soon be the first major city in the United States to offer citywide wireless fidelity.

Wireless Philadelphia, a nonprofit organization, has teamed up with EarthLink to create a system that uses a series of routers to provide a consistent "mesh" of wireless signals throughout the city. The project, which is available now in certain areas, will be completed by October.

The Network

The wireless network consists of 4,000 to 5,000 routers — each with a signal radius of 500 feet — that are positioned on top of light poles throughout the city, creating a consistent 135-square-mile "hot spot." These routers connect user signals to access towers that then funnel the traffic to EarthLink's landline network, with speeds up to 1 megabyte per second.



Connecting Outdoors

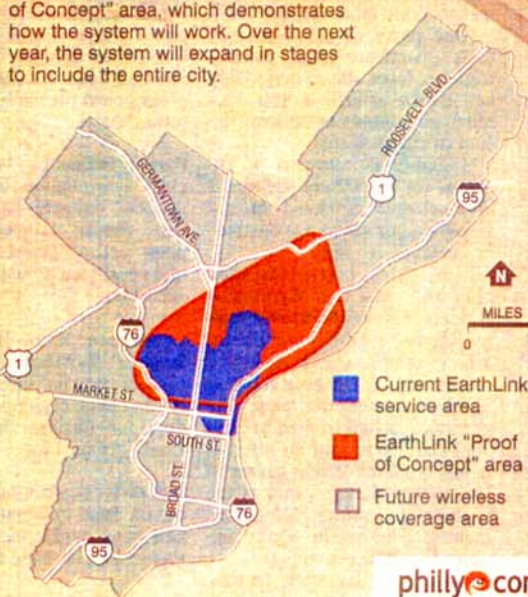
Internet users can sign on to the network using their existing 802.11b- or 802.11g-compliant wireless cards, but will have to create an account with EarthLink. The service will be available in monthly subscription plans, or one- and two-day passes. There will be 22 parks and public places that offer free access.

Connecting Indoors

To access the network indoors, most homes will need a CPE device, which is a sort of modem-signal booster. This device will be provided by EarthLink when you sign up for the service. At this time, Wireless Philadelphia will guarantee service only to buildings as tall as three stories.

Wireless Coverage Area

EarthLink currently offers service to customers in a small area of Philadelphia. It has also created a 15-square-mile "Proof of Concept" area, which demonstrates how the system will work. Over the next year, the system will expand in stages to include the entire city.



Cost

The cost for the service will start at \$21.95 per month for retail customers. Discounted start-up packages may become available.

Digital Inclusion

A discounted rate of \$9.95 per month will be available for customers who qualify. Household income must be at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Guideline to qualify for the digital inclusion rate.

philly.com Learn more via <http://go.philly.com/wifi>

SOURCES: Wireless Philadelphia; EarthLink

BETO ALVAREZ / Inquirer Staff Artist

WIFI from E1

North Philadelphia community-revitalization group. These partners will help identify candidates for the discount laptops and EarthLink subscription programs. Many of these groups already have identified people eligible for discounts, because they help administer some of the qualifying programs, such as energy assistance.

Goldman said he was seeking "wireless angels" to donate at least \$25,000 each to kick off the fund-raising.

His organization is choosing neighborhood outreach and other groups as partners. The first such partner is People For People, a

North Philadelphia community-revitalization group.

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