

Wireless city steps closer

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Milledgeville took a giant technological leap forward Tuesday when city council voted unanimously to contract with Internet provider Clearwire for the city's proposed wireless Internet system.

Tuesday's vote and Mayor Richard Bentley's signature will mark the end to the "frustratingly slow and arduous process" of planning and developing a viable wireless system and selecting the right service provider to bring those plans to fruition. But Bentley said the protracted process enabled the city to initiate the best possible service to meet the city's needs while staying within the city's budget.

In September 2006, Milledgeville received an \$862,000 grant from the Georgia Technology Authority through the Wireless Communities Georgia program to turn the city into one of several model communities to show the benefits of using wireless access to improve economic development, educational access and governmental services.

Milledgeville is partnering with Kirkland, Washington-based company Clearwire to create a wireless network utilizing WiMax technology, an emerging platform that operates similar to cellular phone service. Milledgeville decided to go with Clearwire over Delaware-based Solutrea, which the city had been in negotiations with for a Wi-Fi network platform, because the WiMax technology provides a larger coverage area at a lower cost than Wi-Fi. The Milledgeville system will be an outgrowth of Clearwire's efforts to build a wireless network in Atlanta.

The system will be subscription-based with several different price categories for Milledgeville consumers. Another advantage of Milledgeville's contract with Clearwire is that consumers in the Milledgeville area will be able to access the wireless system in any of the 46 markets Clearwire services.

"Overall, this provides mobility," said City Planner Russell Thompson, who has been instrumental in finding the best service provider and negotiating the city's contract with Clearwire. "You're not locked down, you can take [Internet access] with you."

To receive the Wireless Communities Georgia grant, Milledgeville proposed a wireless service that would improve public safety resources, include low-to-moderate income consumers, improve access for area students and help facilitate economic development.

Public safety was one of the fundamental applications proposed in the city's grant. Bentley said the primary use of the wireless service will be computer-aided dispatch for emergency response personnel. The Milledgeville Police Department will allot part of its technology budget to the purchase of laptop computers so officers will have more efficient and effective access to the Georgia Crime Information Center while on patrol.

Thompson said an early consultant presented city officials with figures detailing the discrepancy between students with and without access to the Internet and how that affected grades and

graduation rates. This system will be designed to help bridge the digital divide to those who would not otherwise be able to afford Internet access.

To facilitate access for low-to-moderate income persons, the city is partnering with One Community and the Knight Foundation to help provide the resources to reach out to the broader Milledgeville community. The Knight Foundation is looking into programs such as low-interest loans to purchase computer hardware and computer training to help Milledgeville become more inclusive of all members of society. Clearwire will provide a discounted service to low-to-moderate income persons.

But the application with the most limitless possibilities is how wireless Internet can assist the city economic development efforts. Milledgeville-Baldwin County Development Authority Director Angie Gheesling said the development authority board voted to provide \$30,000 of its Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax allocation to help facilitate the wireless network. "We recognized what this can mean to the city, especially to industries that are looking to locate to the community," Gheesling said. "[Internet access] is something that is important to every company."

Bentley said that he foresees the wireless network providing economic development applications that cannot possibly be conceived at this time.

"All other things being equal, for investors who are looking to locate somewhere, we have a huge advantage over similar communities," he said. "This sets us apart from our contemporaries."

Bentley said the wireless network has the potential to change outsiders' image of Milledgeville.

"This is very progressive and visionary in my opinion," Bentley said. "It presents a very positive, progressive image of Milledgeville."

But he concedes that it wouldn't have been possible without the dedicated efforts of people like Thompson, Gheesling, project consultant Karl Edwards and Beverly Blake of the Knight Foundation, who helped take all the possibilities a wireless community had to offer and networked them to present a more technologically-advanced tomorrow.

"I look forward to applying this to daily life in Milledgeville," Bentley said. "It's not up and running yet, but that is a technicality. I am confident that the city is as excited as I am."

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