

## Grand Rapids aces its Wi-Fi tests

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GRAND RAPIDS -- A series of tests this summer proved Grand Rapids has what it takes to become a "hot spot" for wireless Internet service.

Now city officials have to decide whether they want to get into the Wi-Fi game and, if so, who will pay for it, according to a consultant hired to evaluate the test sites.

Seven companies set up free wireless networks throughout the city in June, July and August. Though the city signed up 10 vendors for the "Hot Spots, Cool Cities" test, two have yet to deploy their network and one dropped out.

After several weeks of testing, all seven vendors proved they have the technology to meet the type of standards the city would require of a citywide network, said Bill Stark, president of Excelsio Communications.

In terms of usage, the most successful deployment occurred at the Wealthy Theatre site, where its availability was heavily promoted in the neighborhood, Stark said.

Now the city has to decide how to set up a citywide network that won't burden taxpayers. "Every city is different and every process is different," Stark told city commissioners Tuesday.

Officials in other U.S. cities trying to develop citywide wireless networks have built it themselves or found a company to build it for them, Stark said.

Cities such as Minneapolis and Portland, Ore., have sought bids from Internet service providers who offer subscriptions to consumers and give the city free access to the network in exchange for the right to use city right-of-ways and facilities.

The city of Philadelphia has created a nonprofit organization to build a network that serves the city and wholesales the remaining bandwidth to private vendors who are selling access to the public.

For their part, city officials say they are eager to get Wi-Fi going.

Mayor George Heartwell said he prefers a private-public partnership that will meet the city's public safety needs and bridge the "Digital Divide," the term for the poor who have no access to the Internet.

Assistant City Manager Greg Sundstrom said he hopes to develop a business model and get requests for proposals out by Christmas.

By bringing a high-speed citywide wireless network to town, city officials say it will help them provide better police, fire and other city services.

"This is very important to police and fire," said Communications Bureau Director Ralph Gould.

A high-speed network would allow authorities to transmit images of crime suspects, fire scenes and other emergency sites in real time.

Currently, the city's police and fire communications systems are limited to voice and text transmissions over four radio channels, Gould said.

Meanwhile, city officials say they're keeping an eye on Lansing and Washington, where several bills that would govern municipal wireless networks are in the hopper.