

# Push for free mobile broadband on the rise

**As some cities go out of their way to provide free wireless broadband, telecommunications operators should stop opposing government-sponsored municipal wireless access, a recent report from StrategyAnalytics argued. Instead of fretting about the upcoming wireless access plans, companies should instead realize the benefit and start focusing on how the moves will be implemented, the London-based research group concluded.**

Some U.S. cities, most notably Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco, have developed initiatives to provide affordable broadband for the citizens and businesses in their communities. Meanwhile, hundreds of smaller municipalities such as Dunedin, Fla., are also hoping to provide low- or no-cost broadband to all of their residents through fixed or wireless infrastructure.

It's a leap forward from the days of limited wireless access when open wireless hotspots would be rare enough to warrant being advertised by technology enthusiasts using chalk symbols on nearby walls in a practice known as "warchalking." Although warchalking never fully took off, its purpose was soon surpassed as more and more public spaces, including schools, airports, hotels and cafes, began introducing WiFi hotspots. The practice has now expanded to local governments wanting to bring the interconnected benefits of broadband to as many of their citizens and businesses as possible.

But not everyone gets it, not least the incumbent broadband operators who have viewed the plans as a threat, leading to lost revenue and dependence on operators for broadband provision. In the United States, Verizon, Comcast and AT&T have all voiced their opposition to municipal wireless, putting pressure on local governments not to go ahead with their projects and, in some cases, succeeding. In January 2005 the state of Nebraska banned municipal broadband under such pressures. The move was dubbed by wireless observers at MuniWireless as "a temporary triumph of a tiny number of companies that represent a regulated monopoly over the vast majority of businesses and individuals." AT&T does seem to have reversed its stance somewhat and is now actively working with municipalities on their broadband projects, although this in turn has raised questions on how municipalities can cope with the organization's market power.

These moves mirror the conclusions drawn by the StrategyAnalytics report, which was released earlier this month. In reviewing the current state of municipal broadband initiatives and some of the non-political obstacles that it faces, the report indicates that municipal broadband is more likely to be a long-term opportunity than a threat. The conclusions reflect the views of municipal wireless proponents who have previously argued that the networks will in fact open up a broader range of customers that the incumbents already serve.

Instead of fretting about what might happen if municipal broadband comes along, telecoms operators should bite the bullet, realize that the plans are already here -- and start planning for how the networks are going to be implemented. If they want a better return on their political capital, StrategyAnalytics recommend that the companies start focusing on the issues of network neutrality and local franchising, both of which have drawn the attention of the Senate the past week. Network neutrality encompasses the principles of a standard, open communication network; its proponents argue that it creates a vibrant internet economy, sustaining competitive communications services. Without network neutrality, consumers would get worse services for higher prices, according to recent reports from Roycroft Consulting. When building broadband networks, local governments and franchisers have been recommended to not use local ordinances to discriminate. If they did it would be tantamount to allowing telecoms providers to act as "gatekeepers" who put "toll booths on the information highway," as reports from the Free Press term it. Free Press Policy

Director Ben Scott testified about these issues last month in front of the Senate Committee on Science, Technology and Transportation at a hearing on broadband and consumer choice.

The StrategyAnalytics report may however be more pertinent to U.S. operators than those elsewhere. The EU in particular has come in for praise from supporters of municipal broadband proponents, for its public investment in municipal wireless and fiber-optic networks, and its requirements that incumbent telecoms operators open up their networks to competitors.

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