

Let there be Light: Seattle needs public broadband

a position paper from Reclaim the Media

The City of Seattle is recognized for its national leadership in discussions of broadband Internet technology. Chief Technology Officer Bill Schrier often speaks in national forums about the civic and economic benefits of universal high-speed broadband, and Mayor Nickels was named a "broadband visionary" last year by the National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisers (NATOA) for the city's work "recognizing the importance of fiber optics to economic and community development, and for taking steps to secure the benefits of fiber" for the people of Seattle.

However, our elected officials have not consistently treated high-speed broadband access as an essential part of our city's next-generation infrastructure. It is rapidly becoming clear that universally-available, high-speed broadband internet is more than a privilege—it is the engine that will drive the next-generation of economic development. While *Forbes* recently named Seattle the nation's "most wired city," that label masks a more complicated situation, in which low-income/people of color in Seattle are about 30% less likely to access high-speed Internet at home than their higher-income/white neighbors. With the growing importance of broadband Internet for our economy, health, culture and civic involvement, overcoming this disparity is an important priority.

Even if Seattle compares favorably with other US cities, we still lag behind increasingly relevant international standards. A recent survey by Strategy Analytics concluded that the US ranks just 20th in the world in household broadband usage.

The good news is that the city has a clear idea of the best path forward: building fiber Internet connections to every home and business. In 2005, the city's Task Force on Telecommunications Innovation determined that a city-wide network of high-capacity fiber-optic cable will provide "the best long-term solution" for Seattle's Internet needs. Fiber connections to homes, businesses, community organizations and public agencies will allow Seattle to enjoy next-generation communications experiences such as **two-way, high-definition live video.**

According to the 2005 report, Seattle needs these services, and we can have them – but it is clear that we'll have to build them ourselves. The report recognized that private phone and cable companies have proven unwilling or unable to provide the long-term needs of city residents, and urged the Mayor and City Council to develop a sustainable business model for the city to build a public-owned fiber broadband network.

A May 2007 study commissioned by the city investigated various business models, with Internet service provided either by a public utility or by one or more private companies leasing access from the city. Such a network could make use of more than 350 miles of fiber network capacity which the city, City Light and other public institutions already have in place, much of it currently underused. The 2007 study estimated that costs would likely total about \$460 million, and that the network would break even financially with a subscriber base of just 24% of households – paying rates as much as 20% below current market prices for Internet service.

With the right vision backed by strong decisions, Seattle is poised to become a true national leader in connecting its residents, businesses, community organizations and public institutions with next-generation Internet access. Federal broadband stimulus funds, available for application this year, provide a remarkable opportunity for bold elected leaders to push forward our city's best plans, and make real our shared vision of affordable broadband for everyone.



Recommendations

Access to high-quality, affordable broadband is a fundamental right. It is also a keystone for broad-based economic development, participatory democracy and other measures of a healthy community. The city must prioritize this essential investment in next-generation community infrastructure.

- In accordance with the recommendations of the Task Force on Telecommunications Innovation2005 report, the city of Seattle should commit to building, by 2015, a fiber network capable of providing all homes, offices and public institutions with affordable high-speed access.
- Like other essential public utilities, the network should be municipally-owned. A public/community service providers should provide retail Internet service to local customers, possibly alongside competing private service providers.
- Plans for a public-owned network should begin with "lighting up" over 350 miles of optical fiber which the city already owns, installed under Seattle streets.
- The city should take advantage of federal stimulus funds provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to build the core of this network over the next two years.

When everyone has affordable access, the entire community benefits.

- The city should prioritize bringing public-owned broadband access to the Central District, an area historically underserved by telecommunications infrastructure.
- The city should expand its successful Internet adoption/technology skills training programs to include digital media literacy training, digital media production skills, and other elements designed to stimulate home subscription to broadband services. These programs should also be expanded in public schools.
- The city should broaden its successful experiments with free wireless access in key business zones, and should provide wireless access in all community centers, parks facilities, neighborhood assistance centers, and public areas of city office buildings.

Connected communities are green communities. Connecting the city through a public-owned fiber network will profoundly deepen the city's commitment to environmental sustainability and energy savings.

- Seattle City Light and the city should collaborate to create a fiber-based "smart grid" system, dramatically increasing energy efficiency and security while lowering consumer costs.
- Seattle City Light should develop plans for extending smart grid technology into consumers' homes, allowing for next-generation energy-saving benefits such as Internet-based remote control of heating and lighting, home security monitoring, and public safety systems such as smoke alarms.
- City Light should allow its existing fiber infrastructure to form part of a citywide network.
- The city should continue investing in technology development and consumer education to keep Seattle residents in the vanguard of smart energy consumption, providing a model for the region and the nation.

Seattle should deliver on the promise of e-Democracy. With newspapers and other media under threat, the Internet is more vital than ever before as a source for diverse news and journalism outlets, health and safety information, and access to local government.

- The City's community technology and digital inclusion programs should place a new emphasis on providing resources for media production training, partnering with organizations that provide production skills as well as digital media literacy education.



- The city should seek out ways to encourage and highlight local community media, citizen journalism and new journalism initiatives which promote civic engagement and community development.
- The city should develop new e-Democracy tools allowing local residents to participate electronically in public meetings and other local government proceedings. Neighborhood Service Centers should be equipped to provide basic orientation in accessing local government websites.

References:

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