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Wireless Oakland slowly taking shape

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While the project to create universal, free wireless Internet in Oakland County is behind schedule, planners at the county say the delay has been well-spent wrestling light poles and defeating concrete walls.

They also say the challenge makes the struggle worthwhile.

Wireless Oakland, launched by County Executive L. Brooks Patterson in his 2005 State of the County address, has strayed from its original timeline by several months.

But officials contend they didn't think it was going to be a cakewalk.

"It's not a bigger project than we thought," Patterson said. "We knew it was going to be a challenge of engineering and funding. But, if you're going to be a bear, be a grizzly."

He said other counties are doing similar projects on a smaller scale. Smaller, he said, and therefore not big enough.

"910 square miles is a challenge," Patterson said. "If we get it, the reward is investment and attention. It's something we can beat our chests over."

Deputy County Executive Phil Bertolini said the downtown areas of Pontiac and Wixom are already getting free Internet service and Troy, Birmingham, Royal Oak, Madison Heights and Oak Park are next.

"We are hoping to begin construction on those after January first," he said. "That should take about 60 days, afterward we'll launch the schedule for the rest of the county."

Of course, the project is already behind schedule. Bertolini said the first part was more difficult than subsequent parts. Rather than launch the system in the Phase I areas quickly but haphazardly, the decision was made to get everything right the first time.

"We wanted to go in the right areas with the right technology," Bertolini said. "We lost 10 months but they were 10 months well-spent."

The time was eaten up getting the infrastructure in place on the assets. The "assets" in this case are the county's and communities' contribution to the project. The wireless technology that will create the system is being hung on light poles, traffic devices, water towers and municipal buildings. There are a lot of variables.

"There's differences in height, locations, power," he said. "We have to be careful where we put (the infrastructure) so that we get a good, blanket coverage."

He said the whole county, every community in it, is expected to have access to the wireless system by 2008.

As previously mentioned, parts of downtown Pontiac and Wixom already have free, basic Internet service at 128k upload/download speeds. But in metro Detroit -- one of the most wired regions of the nation -- simple access is not going to make the nut. For years, residents have had access to DSL and cable Internet speeds.

Michtel, the county's private sector partner, will offer higher speeds and expanded services for a fee. General Manager Tony Yangouyan said the basic (free) service will be two to three times faster than dial-up service.

"In the first phase of service, customers will be able to get 512k upload/download for \$20 a month," Yangouyian said. "We'll offer voice-over-Internet phone for \$20 extra."

Internet speed will be up to the customer. He said access speeds higher than 512k will be available for people willing to pay more. As soon as the basic free service is available, extra speed and services will be available as well.

In the future, the deals could get better.

"Ultimately, we may be giving away higher speeds for free," Yangouyian said. "It depends on how much revenue we generate from advertising."

More information about pricing and service plans is available at www.michtel.com.
