Cities find Wi-Fi future  
More municipalities offering the service  
By Amy Cox  
CNN

It's not Silicon Valley, but Chaska, Minnesota, may be moving to the leading edge of Wi-Fi technology as it begins offering the service for all city residents. One of only a handful of cities in the nation to try it, Chaska -- just southwest of Minneapolis -- plans to have most of the city's 15 square miles Wi-Fi operational by the end of October. "We firmly believe that the Internet is going to be just as much a part of everybody's future as the telephone or electricity is and we want to make sure that everybody has equal access to it," says Bradley Mayer, Chaska's information systems manager. "We wanted to ensure there was some sort of broadband activity that could be affordable by our residents." Currently, the city with a population of around 18,000 has signed up about 2,000 subscribers for the service, Mayer says. While the city works on tweaking the 200 access points placed throughout town, the service is free. When it becomes fully operational in October, subscribers will pay $15.95 a month. The low cost is one of the advantages of having a municipal-run Wi-Fi network over a private company, Mayer says. "We're not in it to make money. We're going to provide a service for the residents of the city. We operate at a much lower cost because we're not a profit center." Chaska joins a spate of other cities preparing for or launching municipal-run Wi-Fi networks. In September, Philadelphia officials announced a $10 million plan to transform all 135 square miles of the city into one Wi-Fi hot spot, placing cells on street lights and other devices. The service would be free or very low cost, according to the city. San Mateo, California, operates a secured Wi-Fi network in the central part of the city for the police department. Officers can now access databases from their car laptops without driving back to the station. And in St. Cloud, Florida, residents and visitors can surf the Web for free using a Wi-Fi network created by the city. Currently, service covers a 12 block square downtown, but will be expanded to include all of an upcoming planned 590-acre community within the city.

Jumping on the Wi-Fi bandwagon?

Some industry experts, however, are wary of cities providing and maintaining a Wi-Fi service and believe many municipalities are jumping on the high-tech bandwagon. "I haven't seen a lot of what I would consider real successes yet [with municipal wireless]," says Derek Kerton, founder of the wireless consulting firm The Kerton Group. "I'm watching the hype. More and more cities are announcing they're going to do it, and I get concerned because I'm hearing more and more rhetoric that isn't consistent with the underlying technology." Kerton explains that Wi-Fi for its intended use -- a small local area network -- works fine. But trying to expand that into a city-wide system will only lead to interference from other Wi-Fi networks set up by individuals and businesses or even from everyday objects like microwaves, baby monitors and cordless phones that run on the same low frequency as Wi-Fi. "A Wi-Fi network over a wide area is like trying to run an airline industry without air traffic control," he says. "You're going to have planes crash into each other occasionally because no one's controlling it." He also questions the cities' capabilities for ongoing maintenance of such a high-tech service. "The access point that covers your house is down -- how long will it take the city to get out there and fix it? Or will they complain they don't have the budget to fix it?" Ultimately, widespread municipal Wi-Fi projects will fail, Kerton believes, as residents quickly demand new technology down the road.
But Mayer says Chaska has planned for the inevitable wireless advances and fully expects changes to come to the network as new technology emerges. So far, customers are happy with the city's Wi-Fi start, he says. "It's been a fantastic opportunity for us, and the residents seemed to have embraced it with open arms ... I think it's going to be a very successful story."

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