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Boston Convenes Wi-Fi Summit
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On May 19th, citizens and leaders in the City of Boston will gather in a public forum at the Museum of Science to discuss ways to bring free, public Wi-Fi to Boston. The Wi-Fi Summit, which is free and open to the public, was the outgrowth of an order Boston City Councilor John Tobin filed late last summer. Tobin is leading an effort to find ways to bring more widespread, public wireless access to America's fifth largest city.

"In January, my office convened the Wi-Fi Task Force to plan the Summit," says Tobin. "We reached out to a diverse cross-section of creative and talented wireless technology experts, neighborhood leaders, educators, government officials, businesspeople and non-profit representatives, and asked them to help us put the event together."

BTS Partners, a privately held Boston-based consulting firm which focuses on deployment of large network solutions, was issued a $25,000 Boston Foundation grant to study and analyze the current state of wireless technology in Boston. The primary focus of the Wi-Fi Summit will be the presentation of the results of that survey.

"We believe that we can build on the momentum created by the Summit and keep the conversation going," Tobin says. "We hope that some of the participants in the Summit will volunteer to help us plan the next steps. The information gathered by the [BTS study] will give the city a great place to begin."

Among the central players in the effort to bring more Wi-Fi to Boston are the three founding members of the Boston Wireless Advocacy Group (WAG): Michael Oh, Susan Kaup, and Pat McCormick. The group, whose mission is to "advocate, educate, and inspire," was invited to join the Wi-Fi Task force and assist in planning the summit and helping to guide future plans for public Wi-Fi.

"We're hoping to build some consensus around what the next steps would be. We don't have a definite goal," says McCormick. "As we put on the table the results of [the BTS study], we'll start looking at what the best solutions are for Boston. They are looking at the existing infrastructure in terms of fiber, buildings, street lamps—things the city owns—and institutional networks, universities, hospitals. We're hoping to see where we have some overlap."

The most powerful motivation for Tobin, McCormick and others on the task force seems to be concern for working class and lower income residents who have been lost on the other

side of what is commonly referred to as "the digital divide."

McCormick, who is the former CIO of Somerville, Mass. (just north of Boston), says "Wireless won't solve the 'digital divide' problem, but it will help. These days, computers are mostly about being online. Most people don't see them as being very useful if they can't be online, high speed, all the time. The cost of that access is prohibitive for a lot of individuals."

"The way I framed it is, if we can solve the access problem, then we can gladly take on the hardware problem," McCormick says. "It's like building a bike path or jogging path in an area with really dangerous streets. Whether people will go out and buy roller blades or bicycles, it's an issue, but it shouldn't prevent us from talking about the connectivity issue. I'm not saying the hardware issue doesn't exist, but we're moving into a world where the connectivity issue is maybe not primary, but it's up there with hardware."

Among the speakers and presenters at the summit will be Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, who has been supportive of the work of the task force.

Tobin and McCormick both say that Boston is not planning to follow perfectly in any other city's footsteps as it moves toward expanding public Wi-Fi.

"At the Summit, we plan to discuss several different models outlined in the BTS analysis," Tobin says. "We will look at other cities' successes and talk about what didn't work out as well."

"Certainly, at this point, it's not as though Boston is looking to go down the path of a Philadelphia, or even a Cleveland," says McCormick.

At a pre-summit community meeting organized by Tobin's office, citizens were generally supportive of the idea of pursuing widespread public Wi-Fi.

"I was pleased that there was a lot of interest in the digital divide as being a primary goal of the wireless Internet at that meeting," says McCormick. "There was also some interest in the aspects of economic development, but more interest in getting Internet out to people who can't afford it."

Of course, altruistic motivations aren't the only driving force.

"Wi-Fi could help us to educate our children, enhance local business districts, and bolster tourism," says Tobin. "We need to examine how Wi-Fi could be used to make Boston a better place to live, work or visit. If Boston wants to stay competitive, we need to make sure the latest technology is easily available."

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