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Coalition Calls Controller's Report On Google/Earthlink WiFi Deal "Ridiculous"

Today, PublicNet San Francisco, a coalition of various community groups and internet professionals, called Controller Ed Harrington's recent report on the pending Google/Earthlink monopoly WiFi deal ridiculous. PublicNet called attention to recent news reports that Earthlink has pulled back from private municipal WiFi plans in all but the 13 cities it has already contracted with, because such WiFi networks are proving to be unworkable, unpopular, and unprofitable.

Groups releasing the statement included the San Francisco People's Organization (SFPO), Our City, the community wireless network SFLan and BARWN, and Internet services provider United Layer.

PublicNet pointed to articles on CNet (1) and at FierceWiFi (2) that report a massive restructuring happening in the municipal WiFi market which indicates that San Francisco's tentative deal with Earthlink and Google is not only highly questionable technologically, but might even be financially risky. The articles show that WiFi providers, including Earthlink, are pulling back from previous commitments with cities, and in some cases asking them for more money and contract capitulations.

Said Bruce Wolfe of the San Francisco People's Organization, "I can't believe that the Controller's office is jumping onto this sinking ship with the Mayor and DTIS. These guys know that WiFi is an out-door technology that can't possibly provide reliable service to hundreds of thousands of current Internet users and would-be non-users in large office and apartment buildings all over the city. And does Ed Harrington seriously want us to believe that tens of thousands of people are going to suddenly cancel their high-speed wired DSL and cable connection to switch to inferior, spotty, WiFi connections at speeds that aren't even fast enough for smooth video and phone calls (VOIP); just to save 10 or 20 bucks a month on their internet bill? That's ridiculous. If we go forward with this deal, we could be left holding the bag no less a 'white elephant' in four years."

Eric Brooks with the local grassroots organization Our City said, "The Controller strangely failed to point out that a recent Budget Analyst's report (3) on the Google/Earthlink monopoly WiFi deal, shows that the City itself could install the same type of network at three times better connection speeds and at much lower cost to users. So, even if we assume for argument that this dubious WiFi strategy will actually work, a publicly owned system would clearly save us much more money than this Comcast-like 16 year franchise deal with Earthlink and Google. I find it unbelievable that Harrington isn't championing a publicly owned system as the best option."

Tim Pozar with United Layer, the internet services provider that installed a free Internet system for users in San Francisco's Alice Griffith housing project, stated, "Recent reports on municipal WiFi show that companies once planning big roll-outs of privatized municipal WiFi service to communities all over the

country, are now having to seriously rethink their plans because such outdoor wireless technologies are failing to provide reliable service inside of buildings. Many of these fledgling systems are proving to be unpopular money losers. Even more important, the extreme difficulty of reaching users inside of buildings makes the Google/Earthlink WiFi strategy the worst possible model for bringing internet to low income communities which don't have it yet. We need a hybrid fiber-optic/wireless solution, and the Budget & Finance Committee is already working toward this goal."

Ralf Muehlen, who provides free internet access to hundreds of San Franciscans through the nonprofit community wireless network SFLan concluded, "The numbers in the Controller's are way off; they are easily falsified with a 10 minute Google search. I wonder how many people would pay Earthlink \$22 a month, when AT&T sells a 50% faster service for \$20. And the Controller's projections of capital cost incorporate no upgrades for 16 years. This is no way to narrow the Digital Divide."

Endorsing Organizations

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United Layer - 200 Paul Ave. #110, SF, CA 94124, <http://www.unitedlayer.com>
Contact: Tim Pozar, 415-637-8512, pozar@barwn.org

Referenced Articles

(1) CNet: Facing economic realities of muni Wi-Fi
http://news.com.com/2102-7351_3-6181058.html?tag=st.util.print

(2) FierceWiFi: Is the muni-WiFi market headed for a shakeout?
<http://www.fierceWiFi.com/story/is-the-muni-WiFi-market-headed-for-a-shakeout/2007-05-07>

(3) SF Board of Supervisors Budget Analyst: Fiscal Feasibility Analysis of a Municipally-Owned Citywide Wireless Broadband Network
http://www.sfgov.org/site/budanalyst_page.asp?id=53280

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