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St. Charles seeks funding to boot up wireless study

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While it might be in a form other than Wi-Fi, countywide wireless Internet service looks feasible in St. Charles County.

Last spring, **Partners for Progress**, a group of more than two dozen top executives of key businesses in St. Charles County, commissioned an assessment study to determine the feasibility of providing wireless Internet access throughout the county. St. Louis consulting firm Fusiva completed the first phase of the study, which determined that the county does have the infrastructure necessary to make it one of the first in the nation to be able to provide wireless Internet to the entire community.

"We learned that, from an engineering standpoint, it's feasible for some entity, whether it be one of the telecom companies located here in the county, to develop some kind of a wireless broadband system in the county," said Greg Prestemon, president and chief executive of Partners for Progress and of the Economic Development Center of St. Charles County (EDC). Partners for Progress is an offspring association of the EDC.

"Usually people just leap to the conclusion that this would be Wi-Fi, like what you find at Starbucks or a (St. Louis) Bread Co. But there are all sorts of other generations beyond Wi-Fi that Fusiva was looking at from an engineering standpoint. Do we have the right terrain and topography, the right fiber-wired networks in place? The answer to all of those is yes," Prestemon said.

Fusiva is the consulting arm of St. Louis-based technology firm NetLabs LLC, founded by Chief Technology Officer Dave Sandel in 2001. Fusiva and NetLabs also have done various consulting work on network upgrades, infrastructure and security for companies such as St. Louis-based Sigma-Aldrich and First Cellular of Southern Illinois, based in Mount Vernon.

Phase one of the study cost \$25,000, and the second phase is expected to cost the same. Funding for the second phase will be determined during budget meetings next month, said Prestemon, but it's expected that the study would take place early next year.

The goal of phase two is to develop and evaluate various business models, as well as determine the costs of implementing a system. "We're talking about capital costs certainly in excess of \$1 million, but I don't know if it's in excess of \$10 million. And then there would be operating costs as well," Prestemon said.

The study stems from Partners' efforts to evaluate and enhance the quality of life in the county based on four sectors: economy, health, education and lifescape. In order to assess the county's strengths and weaknesses, a "Measuring Progress" initiative conducted each of the last two years compared St. Charles County to eight other suburban counties from around the country. In the 2004 analysis, based on those four sectors, St. Charles ranked second to the Kansas City area's Johnson County.

The wireless Internet initiative would help St. Charles, which covers 586 square miles, remain strong in the analysis. "Many times the Midwest tends to lag in terms of technology adoption, so if we can be one of the first in the pool instead of just in the middle of the pack, that would be a plus," Prestemon said.

Many municipalities across the country are considering wireless networks. A not-for-profit extension of Philadelphia's city government has a public-private agreement with Earthlink to provide low-cost Internet service to low-income residents, with free access in public spaces.

Chicago and San Francisco also are researching it, "but there aren't clear business models established yet for how to do this," Sandel said.

In St. Charles County, local governments aren't expected to put resources into the project, so Partners would look more toward a private partnership.

"Partners for Progress isn't interested in investing millions in a system or running a system. It's really to be a catalyst, to stimulate discussion and awareness of the need for competitive telecommunications," Prestemon said.

Anna Jones is a St. Louis freelance writer.

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