

Statesboro may soon go wireless

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Posted: Aug. 17, 2007 5:04 p.m.

For those of you driving around the city looking for a wireless hot spot, your wait may be coming to an end. The city council has hired a consultant to look into the possibility of setting up a wireless network in the city of Statesboro.

At the last meeting, the council voted to enter into a contract with Excelsio Communications. The company will conduct a study on the feasibility of creating a wireless network in the city and will help prepare a grant application for the city to take advantage of the Wireless Communities Georgia program.

"The city has been approached by two companies about deploying a wireless network system here in the city," said City Manager George Wood. "We're interested because we think it would be a benefit to the community."

The program is the brainchild of Governor Sonny Perdue, whose idea was introduced during the 1996 State of the State address to the citizens of Georgia. The initiative is designed to assist communities establish local wireless broadband networks.

So far, six communities are taking advantage of the first round of appropriations, which were approved by the legislature for 2006. This year the legislature has appropriated \$1 million dollars for 2007.

According to Richard Calhoun, project director, the funds are to be used to "stimulate economic development, increase education opportunities for citizens and improve services provided by local and state government."

Asked if individuals would be able to sign up for wireless service, Wood said, "That's right, but we don't want to get ahead of ourselves. What this study [by Excelsio] would do is look at the feasibility of it, as well as the most economical and sensible way to approach it."

According to Wood, there are multiple ways a network could be deployed - anything from the private sector totally owning it to the city owning, operating and managing the network.

"I have a bias towards the city not owning [the network] and just partnering with the private sector," said Wood. "Governments don't need to be in a high-tech, quickly changing field that takes a lot of investment. This is not water or sewer which has been done the same for decades. We're talking about something that could fundamentally change overnight."

"Again, my bias is towards private ownership, but I'll wait for the consultant's report before making a final recommendation."

One benefit that Calhoun discussed, was the use of wireless for reading water meters.

Woods echoed his assessment. "One of the biggest benefits is to put attachments on our meters, where they can be read without a meter reader going to every single location and fighting with dogs. It also means less time processing bills."

The benefits, said Calhoun, is that the city could reduce costs associated with gathering information. It would mean less gas spent on driving and less overhead spent on labor.

When asked about meter readers chased by dogs, he said, "And lower insurance costs, too. The applications and benefits of this kind of system are endless."