

A wireless Worcester

By Donald N.S. Unger

A handful of cities are beginning to set up free WiFi zones, areas where people can connect to the Internet over high-speed wireless connections. Joining this trend early would be an inexpensive way for Worcester to address a number of the ills that afflict our troubled downtown.

The logical zone to start with would cover an area from the library to City Hall to the Outlets Mall to the Convention Center. This would allow people in the library to roam freely with their own laptops or PDAs; people on the Common or City Hall Plaza could work outside in good weather during their lunch hours; it would increase the appeal of the mall as college classroom space (if indeed that's the direction it's heading); and a wireless Convention Center speaks for itself.

As for expansion possibilities, the Worcester Medical Center, Union Station (should it ever spring to life), and the ever-chimerical Arts District all make sense. Once a network is in place, anyone who wants to "jump on" need only pay the cost of their own connection; think Cybercafes; think accessing your e-mail from a bus as it cruises through downtown Worcester or from the Food Court at the mall.

Setting up such a system shouldn't be expensive. The technology is off the shelf, cheap and getting cheaper, and the initial businesses involved have been the beneficiaries of significant tax breaks; they should be more than willing to give a little back to put things in motion. Besides, they stand to gain a great deal

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from the synergies to be reaped from such a system. The necessary backbone is already in place, courtesy of Charter Communications, and they would do well to curry a little local favor, given the growing outrage over rate increases and service problems. Even if the city itself had to pay the connection charges out of pocket, it wouldn't amount to more than \$2,000 to \$3,000 per year.

If Bill Gates gave us a \$30,000 grant, the loan of six undergrads from MIT, and a few good tool belts, we could have such

a system up in less than 30 days. But there's no money problem here and there's no tech problem here either. There's more than \$30,000 stuck in the X-ray machine up at the Worcester Airport; we could do the job with five undergrads from WPI; and I have a few tool belts in my basement.

The question is whether we really want it.

We should. More than most of the other projects proposed for the downtown, this one really has the potential to serve a broad coalition of interests at low cost: business via the convention center and the mall; children and the community via the library; the arts, if expanded into an Arts District; or anyone carrying a laptop or PDA with a wireless card.

We need a variety of reasons for people to begin coming downtown again. This could be one of those reasons. Worcester has been trying to represent itself as the home of a high-tech resurgence. This could be part of that resurgence. We need to make it easier for people to connect to each other.

What better way than free? □

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