Is Your Community a Hotspot?

Rural Municipal Wi-Fi as an Economic Anchor

By Nicole T. Allen, AICP, Planning Services Manager, Laberge Group

Many of New York's rural communities have long strived to identify or create a niche that would give them instant recognition as a "hotspot" or the place to be. But it has not been until recently that a rural municipality could, with the flip of a switch, literally be the "hotspot" – that is, the Wi-Fi hotspot for its residents, businesses, visitors and municipal employees.

Cities and towns around the globe are developing networks in neighborhoods, business districts and along main streets where free, high-speed access is attracting visitors and meeting the needs of residents alike. But what about the rural areas of New York State? While in more urbanized localities, cable, telephone and now power companies offer Internet connectivity, the more outlying areas of our state struggle to provide the connectivity that is needed for business and personal uses. From tourism to retail and from distance learning to working from home, the lack of connectivity has impacted every part of the economy.

BENEFITS OF WI-FI

We live in a world where ideas, information and news travel with blinding speed, and we have an intrinsic need to get the edge in business, stay ahead on news or communicate socially with friends around the world. As a result, people need instant, easy and RELIABLE access to the Internet. Wi-Fi enables everyone with a laptop or a smart phone to have access to the Internet whenever and wherever wireless Internet access happens to be available. Municipalities recognize this and, in the drive for a competitive advantage, have begun setting up their own hotspots or more elaborate wireless networks – known as municipal Wi-Fi.

Municipalities, especially rural towns and villages, can expect a Wi-Fi system to generate increased economic development activity as an indirect benefit of this resource. Businesses that need Wi-Fi will be attracted to areas with consistent, reliable service. In addition, a town or village with a Wi-Fi network can market itself as "cyber" or "digital," and this label has traditionally had an extremely positive affect on business expansion and relocation. Ultimately, businesses can attract more customers; customers attract more businesses; and employees can be more productive, closing the digital divide.

Furthermore, a municipal Wi-Fi network can make a rural community an attractive, sophisticated place that can draw more professionals, entrepreneurs, creatives and many others to our rural Main Streets. A reliable Wi-Fi system supports more home-based businesses by encouraging a broader range of low-impact, small-scale enterprises. Municipalities can promote business opportunities and attract non-traditional professionals (telecommuters) who work from home most of the time. Many non-traditional workers need only the ability to connect to the Internet and do not necessitate a bricks and mortar setting to do business. Wi-Fi provides the freedom from infrastructure, and allows towns and villages to focus on promoting their communities' assets, such as their rural landscape, small-town atmosphere, great family community, etc.

This, in turn, brings economic benefits. "If you build it, they will come." This iconic statement from the 1989 movie The Field of Dreams couldn't be more applicable. Offering Wi-Fi today is like building high-end housing. It's a big asset –

except in this case, no one is left out or priced out. Everyone can access it.

COSTS OF WI-FI

While the advantages of municipal Wi-Fi can't be ignored, the big question is: who is going to pay for it? There are three types of Wi-Fi that a municipality can explore: hotspots, zones or clouds.

• ($) Hotspots are limited to a singular place like the library, town hall, school, coffee house, etc.

• ($$$) Zones are an aggregation of hotspots to create a system that is available to a locality, such as a Main Street.

• ($$$$$) Clouds are much larger in scope (and expense) but offer continuous coverage over a significant portion of a town or village's geographic area. Usually, clouds consist of multiple zones and hotspots to create this seamless coverage.

Many larger communities have attempted to create large-scale municipal Wi-Fi clouds and have been unable to get past the costs of the infrastructure. While it is universally agreed that the back end will result in tremendous economic benefit, the front end is not affordable to taxpayers. Just like other services and infrastructure, nothing is free, and at some point in time, someone is going to have to pay something for the network. But this is where a rural community has an advantage. Creating a hotspot in a rural town or village can be cost effective, serve a municipal purpose and function as an economic anchor for the community. It can bring residents to town; much like the "good ol' days" when people came to the market daily, a community hotspot can be the draw that brings towns and residents together.

Municipal Hotspot. Creating a hotspot at a municipal building, such as the town or village hall, has the added benefit of improving government and public safety. Public works departments, code enforcement officials and public safety officials may all benefit from enhanced wireless technology that allows them to save time and improve efficiencies for the community without having to be tied to a desk to complete their jobs. In particular, public safety officials (police, fire and emergency medical technicians), who are tasked with providing a safe environment, can increase response times or have access to critical information in the field. While our rural areas tend to not have the crime challenges of an urban area, community members often rank their emergency response personnel as a critical service for why they chose to live in their community. Therefore, the added

expense for the Wi-Fi hotspot may be strongly supported by a community because of the added benefits and improvements afforded to its local government. However, once you are committed to creating a hotspot, it is worth the investment to ensure your wireless coverage is broad enough to allow public access without diminishing the level of service to your municipal employees and service providers.

Communities throughout the Adirondacks, Catskills and other underserved areas of the state are creating hotspots as a tool to extend the stay of their tourists as well as meet the business needs of their second homeowners or "weekenders." Often, visitors crave connectivity to stay in touch with loved ones, or they use the Internet to research additional activities to enjoy during their vacations. In addition, many second homeowners find that they would stay longer if they could work from home for a few hours. For example, the town of Thurman in Warren County has flipped the switch and has created a municipal hotspot in the town hall, including a room in which residents can "set up shop" and connect to their home or work office to complete their work and extend their stay in the town.

Library or School Hotspot. School or library visitors are typically there to read, write and/or research. So why not give patrons what they want: free access to the Internet. And who wouldn't want their library to provide both a connection to the Web while also providing qualified staff to help them find what they were looking for? The use of the library or school enhances the community facilities and expands the resources available to the community. Many of these facilities are already an anchor in many small communities.

Having access to Wi-Fi allows rural schools to keep their doors open past 2:30 and allow residents to use the facilities for community activities or even business ventures. In the town of Schodack, the availability of both space and connectivity allowed for the conversion of the empty basement level of the middle school into a business incubator for start-up companies.

Cyber Café Hotspot. Many coffee shops already provide free Wi-Fi to entice customers in the door and to ultimately stay a little longer. A municipality may choose to partner with some of its local shops and restaurants to create multiple hotspots along its Main Street. This takes the pressure of providing the service off of the municipality while enhanc-

ing the local businesses. If enough businesses are able to provide coverage, a small Main Street may be able to market its self as a "Cyber Main Street" without costing the taxpayers. This type of marketing is a win-win for the community and the economy.

WI-FI IS LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES

Wi-Fi can be a great way to attract businesses, boost tourism and enhance the quality of life for local residents when we keep the following in mind:

- All current laptop computers can connect to Wi-Fi hotspots.
- Many people travel around the country in their recreational vehicles searching for cafés and libraries with Wi-Fi hotspots.
- Most hotspots are free to the users.
- Some Wi-Fi hotspots are extremely fast, making them more attractive to users.

"But you never know what you're gonna get." The more reliable and predictable a wireless system you can build, the more economic benefit you will receive on the back end. As you decide on your approach to wireless, remember to only use it when it offers a unique advantage to your community and keep the following final two thoughts in mind:

- Define and limit objectives: build a network, don't save the world!
- Educate yourself on the costs and prepare to pay for it! ❏

is our Middle Name

In 2013, either directly or through co-sponsorship, the Association of Towns of the State of New York was responsible for more than 560 hours of training for elected and appointed New York State town officials.

That's 23-and-a-half days of training for town officials! We plan to bring you more of the same through 2014 and beyond, so stay tuned to our Web site (www.nytowns.org) and our Twitter (@nytowns) in addition to our magazine for all the latest training announcements and registration information.