



Palo Alto drops stimulus bid, pinning fiber hopes on Google

By Will Oremus, Daily News Staff Writer; Posted: 02/23/2010 12:36:58 AM PST

Barack Obama was the candidate of hope. But Palo Alto's city council decided Monday that Google, not the president's stimulus act, offers the best hope for fulfilling its longtime goal of providing super-high-speed Internet access citywide.

The council voted 6-0, with two members sitting out and a third absent, to drop its recent application for federal stimulus funding of its broadband fiber network and focus on a bid to partner with the Mountain View-based search engine giant. It will be one of dozens, if not hundreds, of cities responding to Google's Feb. 10 request for information from U.S. communities interested in being test markets for a blazing-fast "fiber to the home" network.

City Manager James Keene said Palo Alto's chances for stimulus cash looked dim, since Obama's broadband plan was aimed at communities where Internet access is scarce. By contrast, Keene and several other officials speculated that a plugged-in city such as Palo Alto might be just what Google is looking for.

"I think Google is looking for the strongest place to do their test," said Bob Harrington, a resident who advises the city on its fiber plans. "We've got to be careful about our hubris on this, but I think we have a lot of strengths."

Google's announcement came like manna to longtime backers of the city's fiber project, which has been beset by setbacks since Palo Alto spent \$2 million to build a 41-mile dark fiber ring in 1997. The ring has attracted some big commercial customers, but the city's dream of extending it to every doorstep has proved elusive.

On Monday, the mood in council chambers bordered on giddy as backers urged the council to move on the Google bid as quickly and aggressively as possible. Driving the urgency was the realization that the city has little in the way of a backup plan if the search giant next door passes it over.

Council Member Sid Espinosa, who once lived at the famous Addison Avenue house where Hewlett-Packard began, made a rare direct appeal to the cameras that broadcast the council meetings online.

"If Google is out there listening, if any decision-makers are there and paying attention, we as a city are ready to move quickly to make this a reality," he said. "We have a commitment to this type of goal and program, and we have worked on this in a grassroots way and an organized way for many years."

Harrington called for a public outreach campaign to get Palo Alto residents involved. He noted that Google's Web page about the fiber project has a button users can press to nominate their community as a test market. "Our objective is to get everybody with a computer in Palo Alto to push that button before March 26," he said.

A few council members cautioned staff to look closely at what Google would want out of the

partnership. And one resident sounded a cautionary note, saying Google is unlikely to swoon at the city's existing dark-fiber infrastructure.

"Google is quite able to see through the successes and missteps we've had," Michael Eager said.

E-mail Will Oremus at woremus@dailynewsgroup.com.

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