

Palo Alto's fiber hopes now rest with Google

City Council wants city to take part in Google's high-speed Internet experiment

by **Gennady Sheyner, Palo Alto Online Staff**, Uploaded: Monday, February 22, 2010, 11:10 PM

Palo Alto's fruitless and frustrating quest for a citywide high-speed Internet network flickered back to life Monday night, when city officials enthusiastically agreed to pursue Google's proposed new ultra-high-speed fiber project.

The City Council voted 6-0 Monday, with Gail Price absent and Larry Klein and Nancy Shepherd recusing themselves, to send Google a "request for information" -- the first step in seeking a Google fiber network.

The Mountain View-based company announced its plans to experiment with ultra-high-speed broadband networks on Feb. 10 and asked cities interested in the project to notify the company by March 26.

The new networks, according to Google, would deliver Internet at speeds of more than 1 gigabyte per second, which the company said is "more than 100 times faster than what most Americans have access to today."

The council happily endorsed staff's proposal to scrap Palo Alto's effort to obtain federal-stimulus funding for a new broadband system and to focus the city's energies on the Google proposal. Council members and community experts argued that the city's history of innovation and Internet leadership makes it a strong candidate for the Google project.

The fact that Stanford University, two major hospitals, and a slew of high-tech companies are located in or around Palo Alto doesn't hurt, nor does the fact that Palo Alto has spent the past decade chasing the type of system Google is proposing, council members reasoned.

"I think the potential to really rally a community and think about the changes that could happen in terms of commerce and education and health care and the innovation that can happen with this type of partnership is truly extraordinary," said Vice Mayor Sid Espinosa, who made the motion to apply for the Google network.

So far, Palo Alto's journey toward a citywide fiber network has been a story of repeated setbacks and heartbreaks. Last March, the city's plan to work with a Canadian consortium on a new fiber system collapsed when the consortium's financing dried up. The city also considered applying for federal funding, but concluded that the National Telecommunications and Information Administration grant -- which is geared toward "unserved" and "underserved" communities -- would be a long shot for an

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But council members agreed that the Google project is more consistent with the city's goals than the city's previous attempts. City Manager James Keene and several speakers at Monday's meeting used the word "excited" to describe their feelings about the Google proposal.

"We're a community with an extremely high percentage of people who use the Internet, which obviously connects much better to the Google proposal," Keene said.

Palo Alto currently operates a dark-fiber ring that provides high-speed Internet to some of its large business customers. The ring generates about \$2 million a year in revenues. City officials have long hoped to leverage the existing fiber system in expanding the city's Internet network to the entire city - a project commonly known as "fiber to the premises," and initially called "fiber to the home."

Bob Harrington, member of a citizen-advisory group that advises the council on fiber issues, said Palo Alto overlays "exactly with what Google seems to be seeking." Harrington said Google allows residents to nominate their cities for the project on its website, <http://www.google.com/appserve/fiberrfi/public/options>.

Harrington asked the council to rally its residents to support Palo Alto's push toward a Google network -- a suggestion the council endorsed. City officials will schedule a public meeting to inform the community about the fiber project in the near future.

"I think Google is looking for the strongest places to do their test and we have a lot of strengths," Harrington said.

The city has until March 26 to submit its request for information to Google. The company is then expected to narrow its list of interested communities and request more information from the cities it selects.

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