



Editorial: A gamble on Google may resuscitate 'fiber'

Google, the global enterprise born in Menlo Park, Palo Alto and Mountain View, may save Palo Alto's high-tech future from lagging behind

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After about 15 years or more of talk, and some near misses, Palo Alto is officially no closer to getting high-speed fiber-optic access to the Internet than it ever was.

Now comes Google, the global enterprise that originated in Menlo Park, had its first commercial office in downtown Palo Alto and now occupies a major complex in Mountain View.

Google announced Feb. 10 that it wants to install hyperfast fiber systems to serve between 50,000 and 500,000 people in communities across the nation that express a serious interest in moving to the fore in the worldwide competition for ultra-high-speed "open access" fiber connections to the Information Age.

How fast is hyperfast? The connection speed Google is envisioning is 1 gigabit per second, or higher. A measure once commonly used is how fast one could download the entire Encyclopedia Britannica at various connection speeds. An old 56 kilobit dial-up modem, for instance, would take about four days. It would take less than 30 seconds with a 1 gigabit-per-second link.

But what Google really wants to find out in this experiment is how people might use such a hyperfast system. Does anyone really want to download the Encyclopedia Britannica? What about movies, books of all kinds, real-time high-definition 3D television links, connections to Second Life for real-time interchanges between Avatars of people across the world for work or education or games?

Google's investment would be more than a test of, "If you build it, will they come?" It will be a test of human creativity and ingenuity, generating uses and building on connections that are impossible to imagine as Google starts on this venture.

Palo Alto is just one of a number of communities Google might fiber-up under this initiative, designed to complement the U.S. National Broadband Initiative of the Federal Communications Commission. Google already has helped Mountain View and East Palo Alto implement community-wide Wi-Fi wireless links to the Internet. While the networks have drawbacks and holes in coverage, they comprise a vast step forward in how Internet access can change a community, or society, in every field of endeavor or enterprise: health, education, social connections, community programs and services, and public safety, among many others.

Yet Palo Alto, despite its long history of innovation and more than a decade of dialogue on fiber — and a revenue-positive "fiber ring" installed in the late 1990s has not kept up with either its near neighbors or with economic competitors around the world.

We believe Palo Alto officials made the right choice in shying away from the estimated \$45 million it would take to connect its fiber ring to homes and businesses, despite disappointing many fiber advocates. The city faces an "infrastructure gap" of up to a half-billion dollars as well as a shortfall in its annual budget for next year of about \$10 million, on top of several million in cuts, deferments or one-time fixes this year.

Hopes for fiber rose in the past two years when a consortium of Canadian-based fiber and financial firms developed a plan for Palo Alto, which would have had far slower speeds than Google is proposing. But they withdrew: Financing problems were a primary factor, but there were reportedly other factors, such as anticipated major fiber-system contracts with Singapore and Australia (which never materialized).

Now Palo Alto has another shot at catching up with and, for a time at least, surpassing most of the rest of the world. Nowhere could Google find a more innovative and adventurous population — technically, entrepreneurially, intellectually and financially — with which to partner in this new venture.

There are important questions that need to be answered, such as ultimate ownership of the system, operational details, even down to the design and color of connection boxes along the streets, if those are needed.

But on the surface this initiative seems to make sense, and the public has an opportunity — or rather a responsibility — to back up city leaders by "nominating" Palo Alto to Google by the March 26 deadline. The Google proposal is detailed at googleblog.blogspot.com

Check it out and if you like what you see, tell Google. And, Google, consider this our nomination.

URL: http://www.paloaltoonline.com/weekly/story.php?story_id=12514