

PALO ALTO WEEKLY NEWS

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Guest Opinion: Another 'Fiber to the Premise' resurrection for Palo Alto?

by [Jay Thorwaldson](#) / Palo Alto Weekly

The long-discussed dream of getting true high-speed fiber-optic service for Palo Alto is looking like a real possibility. There are two reasons: Google is offering to bring fiber to 34 communities, one of which may be Palo Alto; and Palo Alto has a little-known "fiber fund" built on profits from leases of fibers in the city's "dark-fiber ring," created in the late 1990s.

The fund now has about \$20 million that could -- some say should -- be used to build a high-speed-fiber network community-wide. Such a system is now termed "Fiber to the Premise," or FTTP, rather than the earlier "Fiber to the Home" designation. "Premise" means businesses as well as homes and apartments.

Either system would also likely be a mix of direct fiber connections and wireless, or Wi-Fi, from nodes, a kind of substation. Google calls those "huts" and has been discussing with city staff the creation of two such huts to serve different areas of Palo Alto. The nodes would enable creation of really fast broadband wireless sub-networks throughout the city.

A similar setup would likely be part of a direct-city fiber project, funded by the fiber fund, not taxpayer dollars.

Beyond those generalities lie many details and questions yet to be resolved. Behind the current discussions by city staff, citizens committees and a few members of the public lies a new City Council determination to finally get something moving on the fiber front after more than 15 years of discussions, disappointments and confusion.

Discussions of high-speed Internet access actually date back to the early 1990s, when the listserv "Palo Alto Communications Network," or "PA-ComNet," was formed in 1993, followed by the spinoff group, "Palo Alto FiberNet."

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, city officials were actively discussing creating a new fiber-communications utility as part of the city-owned utility operations for water, gas, sewer and electricity. That idea crashed headlong into estimates of up to \$40 million to install fiber-optic lines, a too-risky gamble in a hostile competitive environment.

Emily Harrison, former assistant city manager, even conducted a workshop on fiber networks at a National League of Cities conference in the early 2000s. She warned that in any age the means of transportation of goods and services determines the economic vitality of a region, and noted that in an "information age" high-speed communication is the medium of transport.

Yet a decade or so later, June 22, 2012, I wrote a column noting that FTTP for Palo Alto is "hanging by a thread," a [fiber-thin thread](#).

"Yet even a fiber-thin thread might be stronger than it seems," I wrote, citing the need for resuscitation. I noted that some "believe the decision to abandon the FTTP dream is premature, that some of the extensive analysis done in the city staff report is incomplete, and that the long-term economic vitality of Palo Alto might just hang in the balance."

Since then, mayors and council members have stepped up to the plate, creating citizen committees to explore possibilities and authorizing staff to get engaged. And Google's new plan emerged last February on the sidelines as an alternative to a local homegrown effort.

Today, longtime supporters of FTTP are feeling optimistic that something, Google or home-built, will emerge in the reasonably near future.

One longtime observer/supporter is Bob Harrington, who has played an advisory role for years and won the trust of city officials and potential private partners, such as a Canadian firm that ultimately backed off from doing a Palo Alto system.

The absolute best history of the fiber subject, at least back to about 2000, is on a website Harrington created in 2005, and which he keeps up-to-date: [iPaloAlto.com](#).

His optimism starts with the city's leadership. On the website, he says the City Council "has been proactive in seeking an acceptable path to citywide FTTP. Mayor Nancy Shepherd, Vice Mayor Liz Kniss, and council members Marc Berman, Pat Burt, Karen Holman, Larry Klein, Gail Price, Greg Scharff, and Greg Schmid have all been engaged in a positive and constructive manner."

Besides possible Google involvement, announced last February, Harrington notes the city is in a vastly different position than when it had only taxpayer funds or possible partnership funding to consider for fiber. "The Fiber Utility Reserve currently totals about \$20 million and is growing about \$2 million a year," he notes.

"This reserve has quietly accumulated over 15 years from the fiber license fees paid by about 100 large companies, including a half-dozen resellers. These Fiber utility reserves must be reinvested in city communications projects, which can include fiber and/or wireless communications."

Other longtime citizen advisers include Andy Poggio, a researcher for SRI, and Christine Moe, with lengthy experience with Stanford University's communications networks.

A longtime watchdog and critic, as well as a fiercely dedicated proponent of fiber, is Jeff Hoel, who regularly critiques in detail staff reports and news articles and columns, including mine. Hoel also is optimistic, but doesn't think much of the Google idea, especially with a recent change of management for the project.

"Briefly, I think that it would be best for the city to implement FTTP by itself rather than allowing Google to implement Google Fiber here," he said in an email. "Any private-sector entity, even Google, has to be interested in what's good for shareholders rather than what's good for the community."

He cited five specific concerns, that Google (1) has no announced plan on serving businesses; (2) won't commit to citywide FTTP; (3) has been "pretty inflexible" about when people can sign up; (4) hasn't announced how it would implement a "smart grid" for city utilities; and (5) plans a "point-to-node" (PON) system rather than point-to-point Ethernet.

So it's clear that there is a lot to discuss yet about fiber for Palo Alto homes and businesses (those that don't already have it). But the topic is once again alive and appears to be, um, reasonably resuscitated and, for the moment, well.

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