



Freeing the data

networks were an idea only for small and remote towns that the telecoms and cable firms neglected. Many of those used tax dollars to build their networks, and some, such as St Cloud in Florida, have been very successful. Others teamed up with companies such as MetroFi, based in Silicon Valley, which builds free (ie, advertising-supported) wireless networks in smallish cities that "don't have the political baggage of larger cities", says Chuck Haas, MetroFi's boss.

But large cities also want networks. Philadelphia's will be complete this autumn, and Houston and Atlanta are hatching plans. So San Francisco, which abuts Silicon Valley and fancies itself as cutting-edge, is particularly embarrassed that entire neighbourhoods are, as Chris Vein, the city's technology boss, puts it, "black", meaning that no private Wi-Fi "hotspots" are available and poor people lack affordable broadband. Just by talking about new competition "we have already brought down the prices" of Comcast and AT&T, the city's duopoly, he says. Since San Francisco has lots of tech-savvy commuters and visitors, it also decided to be the first large city to offer a free option for connecting, and so brought in Google, which will try to fund its network using advertising rather than relying on subscriptions as Earthlink does.

The delay and possible derailment of the plan by the Board of Supervisors is therefore frustrating. "The key with these networks is to get them up as quickly as possible," says Esme Vos, an industry expert and founder of Muniwireless.com. The benefits of universal wireless coverage only become obvious once people use it to make, say, free calls from internet phones and other gadgets that have Wi-Fi radios. Earthlink's Mr Berryman, in particular, is at a loss. Earthlink will pay the city 5% of its revenues and \$50 for every light pole it uses, he says. "How can you argue against this when there isn't anything the city is giving?" •

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City-wide wireless internet

Wi-Fi for the masses

SAN FRANCISCO

America's cities are learning to love the idea of universal internet access

IN SAN FRANCISCO, says Ross Mirka-irimi, one of 11 members of the city's elected Board of Supervisors and a co-founder of California's Green Party, "suspicion of corporate interests flows as thick as the fog." So it has come naturally for the Board, the city's legislature, to force a delay on a plan, signed in January by the mayor, Gavin Newsom, and two technology companies, Earthlink and Google, to let the firms blanket the city with free or cheap wireless internet access by putting little "Wi-Fi" antennae on lamp-posts.

The supervisors, say the mayor's people, are just trying to kick the mayor while he's down; Mr Newsom, up for re-election in November, recently admitted to sleeping with the wife of his (former) campaign manager. But the bigger reason appears to be that fog-like suspicion. If "big business"—ie, Earthlink and Google—is so keen on that wireless network, "we should consider doing it ourselves," says Jake McGoldrick, another supervisor. He wants to study other options, including a network financed, owned and run by the city.

Don Berryman, the boss of municipal networks at Earthlink, sees this as a painful epilogue to a headache that he dealt with

two years ago in Philadelphia. At that time, Philadelphia was the first large American city to propose "bridging the digital divide" by offering wireless internet access to the whole city, including, at a subsidised rate, to its poor areas. Verizon, a telecoms giant that has—with Comcast, a cable-TV firm—a duopoly on the city's broadband service, cried socialist wolf and lobbied to block the city from, as it were, distorting private competition.

So Earthlink and Philadelphia changed the debate. Instead of the city using tax dollars to build a network, Earthlink put up its own capital. And instead of getting an exclusive franchise, Earthlink agreed to re-sell network capacity to other providers who ask. Even the right to use the lamp-posts is not exclusive, and others can mount their own routers there. Since the proposal was now about adding private competition, rather than state intervention, the right-wing think-tanks had to shut up. Comcast, whose home is Philadelphia, kept fighting a bit, but then gave up. The city, and the idea of privately-funded municipal internet, won.

Almost all large cities in America took note. Until Philadelphia, municipal Wi-Fi