

Hey, Google Fiber Losers: Build It Yourselfes

By [HYPERLINK "http://www.wired.com/epicenter/author/ryan_singel/"](http://www.wired.com/epicenter/author/ryan_singel/) \o "http://www.wired.com/epicenter/author/ryan_singel/

Posts

by Ryan Singel" Ryan Singel

April 8, 2010 |

Craig Settles has an answer for the 1,095 communities that are not going to get Google to build a next-generation fiber optic network in their area once Google chooses a few winners in the coming weeks.

Don't pout, organize.

"We are harnessing the enthusiasm that Google has generated all over the country for fiber and channeling that into a path to help those communities to get the broadband they want," Settles said.

Settles, a broadband consultant, has paired with North Carolina broadband advocate Jay Ovittore to launch the Communities United for Broadband, which they propose as a hub for communities who spent untold hours on their Google-bandwidth application.

The sheer number of applicants for Google's experiment shows there's a pent-up demand for fast, affordable connections and that the incumbents aren't moving fast enough, according to Settles.

"It's becoming true that if people want broadband, they will have to do it themselves," Settles said.

"The incumbents have a chokehold on our conduit to the future," he said. "They like to yammer on about being innovative but they are not. They say they are in favor of broadband, but they are really in favor of their bottom line."

The project now has more than 600 fans on Facebook, and Settles hopes the group can eventually become a way to share tips, ideas and innovations — since, unlike companies, municipalities aren't in competition with each other. Settles says that as a consultant, he could end up with work from the project, but the real point is to get broadband to the people.

Municipalities have options other than winning the Google lottery, according to David St. John, a spokesman for the Fiber to the Home Council for America. He counts himself a fan of the project for the attention it has brought to fast broadband.

He points out that 5.8 million Americans already have 1-Gbps fiber connections to their homes, even if the throughput isn't turned up as high as Google promises to.

"If you want fiber, you don't need to jump in a shark tank," St. John said, referring to a [HYPERLINK "http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ePQGy_nJZk"](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ePQGy_nJZk) \o "http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ePQGy_nJZk" Sarasota, Florida, mayor's stunt to get Google's attention. "You can get with a company that can overbuild your area or talk about floating some bonds and get yourself some fiber. There are things you can do to bring fiber to your community, and you don't need Google to do it."

Google's highly publicized project is clearly aimed at shaming the nation's telecoms into rolling out faster connections — which benefits it, since faster connections leads directly to more ad sales for it.

While the search and advertising giant has yet to select its test cities, it says that the network will deliver 1 Gbps service — about 100 times faster than today's average connection — and it will be an open network that can be rented at fair rates by companies who want to sell services without owning the pipes themselves.

That's a business model that hasn't fared too well in the United States for ISPs, especially after the FCC removed the requirement that infrastructure owners rent their lines out at a fair price (Sonic.net, Earthlink are among the few businesses surviving on this model).

Cities have tried rolling their own in the past, to mixed success. Such efforts have often run into legal and political troubles as telecoms routinely sue cities, calling the ventures unfair competition. In one such suit in Monticello, MN, TDS Telecom sued the city after 75 percent of voters approved a bond referendum okaying a fiber-optic network. The company claimed it was trying to [HYPERLINK "http://arstechnica.com/old/content/2008/09/telco-to-town-were-suing-you-because-we-care.ars"](http://arstechnica.com/old/content/2008/09/telco-to-town-were-suing-you-because-we-care.ars) \o "<http://arstechnica.com/old/content/2008/09/telco-to-town-were-suing-you-because-we-care.ars>" save the citizens from making a costly mistake, and used the lawsuit to hold off the city's construction while it started its own — despite having had no plans to lay such a network before the vote happened. Incumbents have also gotten state legislatures to ban city-owned networks. The city eventually won the suit and recently began installing services.

But there are some success stories.

Wilson, North Carolina, runs a city-owned network called [HYPERLINK "http://www.greenlightnc.com/"](http://www.greenlightnc.com/) \o "<http://www.greenlightnc.com/>" Greenlight that offers an unbundled 20 Mbps up and 20 Mbps down connection for \$60 a month. Cable subscribers can get 10 Mbps up and down for \$35 — and those who need even faster connections can go all the way up to 100 Mbps.

But there are lots of ways for cities to start a network without committing to building everything at once — which often requires a bond measure.

Settles points to Santa Monica, California, which started with a fiber-optic line serving the government, then expanded it slowly as the city worked on projects like street renovation and sewer-main installations. In March, it launched the Santa Monica City Net, a 10-Gpbs open-access network that Santa Monica businesses can use — which includes Google and some top hospitals using it for tele-medicine. That network is 10 times faster than what the FCC calls for as a goal in 2020.

That's in addition to the city's 21 free wireless hotspots — which also ride on top of the fiber network.

Santa Monica avoided a fight with Verizon, according to Settles, by going to the company and asking if they would build such a network — and then when they said no, built it themselves.

St. John says all-fiber networks are currently a “mixed-bag” of configurations — and that there are more than 50 municipalities and public utilities that have built networks.

More than 500 fiber optic networks have been built by small, independently owned telecoms or coops, which decided to upgrade to fiber so they could bring “big-city” television and internet to rural areas, according to St. John. That helps keep cable companies from poaching their landline customers with VoIP offerings, according to St. John, and keeps the companies closely tied to their local communities.

Communities could choose to have just such a company build its network, or it could start with a “starter” fiber optic ring around the perimeter and then have businesses pay to extend spurs and fill the holes with wireless and WiMax, according to Settles.

“There are as many possible scenarios for a public-private partnership as there are communities,” Settles said.

Settles also wants the Facebook page, website and Twitter stream to rally citizens — especially when it comes time for hearings, referendums or challenges from incumbents at public meetings.

“Communities should be able to set their own destinies,” Settles said.

St. John agrees, and takes it a step further.

“It's just like in the *Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy clicked her shoes to get home,” St. John said. “You have that power already.”

Update: The story was updated to reflect that St. John used the term “mixed-bag” to refer to the configurations of local fiber networks, not to their success rate — which he says is quite high.