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LUS plan 'great ... venture'

Silicon Valley abuzz

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LAFAYETTE -- The Lafayette Utilities System's fiber-optic telecommunications plan is the buzz of technology companies in Silicon Valley and the remainder of the world, the chief executive officer of one of the largest computer companies in the world said Thursday on City-Parish President Joey Durel's weekly radio show.

Scott McNealy, co-founder, chairman and CEO of Sun Microsystems, said LUS's plan to build an ultra-fast fiber-optic network to each home and business in the city is "progressive and a great innovative venture."

"It's the talk of the Valley right now," McNealy said, adding that Sun's chief scientist is probably the "biggest evangelist (for the LUS plan) around the world."

LUS will ask voters on July 16 to approve up to \$125 million in bonds to build the network, which will be used to provide low-cost phone, cable and high-speed Internet service.

All fiber-optic infrastructures --and the incredible communications speeds they make possible -- could end up more beneficial to the United States than the interstate highway system, McNealy said.

The efficiency and productivity of the entire economy would be increased, he said.

And more workers would be able to commute over the Internet, which means spending more time at home with family and less time on the road -- and lower costs for companies, McNealy said.

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Although a self-described "aggressive libertarian," McNealy said that the infrastructure is too important for government not to get involved.

"I just don't see any reason to wait until the private sector can build it out," McNealy said.

Businesses such as Sun Microsystems would "absolutely" think about establishing a presence in a community like Lafayette should it have a widely available, cheap fiber-optic network, McNealy said.

More than half of Sun's 35,000 employees have mobile offices. Thousands work only from home, McNealy said. That saves Sun money on buildings and employee time commuting. McNealy said he works from home a great deal also, which means he has time to watch his children's soccer practices.

Sun Microsystems has a product that would be useful in a city with such widespread broadband, McNealy said.

The Sun Ray is a simple, low-cost computer that serves as a conduit between the user and a massive server, where all the information is stored.

"The network is the computer," McNealy said.

Just like most people don't own their own power plant or water well -- they just turn on the tap or light switch when they need it -- people shouldn't have to own their own computers.

Sun Rays don't have to be upgraded to the latest software or internal processor or anti-virus software: That's done on the server side, McNealy said.

Durel said something like a Sun Ray could be an option in Lafayette to help get computers to more lower-income people, since the cost is lower.

Sun Rays are already in use in places like the U.S. Department of Defense, said Gary Campbell, a sales representative for Sun who was present Friday at KPEL as the interview was taped. McNealy called in by phone.

McNealy also talked about a project called the Global Education Learning Community, which is trying to provide free educational material to children around the world using high-speed Internet capabilities.

California spends more than \$400 million a year on text books, a cost that could be entirely wiped away in the future if all children had access to high-speed broadband and could read their textbooks, talk with instructors and take tests -- for free -- over the Internet, McNealy said.


Durel invited McNealy to visit Lafayette.

"I'd love to come and visit in real life when we get this thing rocking and rolling," McNealy said.


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