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Editorial

Wi-Fi and the Cities

No fewer than 300 cities and towns around the nation have taken wireless Internet access, or Wi-Fi, to the people. San Francisco's aim is to make the entire city a hot spot, Chicago plans to blanket the city with access, and large parts of Philadelphia are to go wireless soon. But New York, which should be leading the way, is dragging. A plan to offer free Wi-Fi access in city parks has been moving slowly, and a larger vision has yet to take shape.

Wide dissemination of Wi-Fi is not the future. It is now, needed by businesses, educators and especially the underserved populations on the wrong side of the digital divide. Rural communities have known for a while that going wireless is cheaper, more reliable and allows even the most remote areas to log in. It spares the expense of laying down extensive networks of cables, not to mention the work and time involved.

Local governments are filling a leadership void at the federal and state levels, and they are going directly to providers to negotiate Wi-Fi deals. San Francisco's mayor has turned to Earthlink and Google. Earthlink, based in Atlanta, is also helping Philadelphia. In some of these deals, lower-speed connections are free, with higher speeds available at a price. The providers also hope to make money off advertising.

Surfing the net in the parks is a modest goal for New York, where some smaller parks have already been hooked up by agreement between independent groups managing those parks and NYC Wireless, a nonprofit organization. The city needs to get moving to get the larger parks online, but it also has to get serious about wider access. The minimal goal — pressed with energy in the City Council by Gale Brewer of Manhattan — should be free or low-cost access in its densely populated, poor neighborhoods in all the boroughs. That is where cable and phone line options are out of financial reach, and where education especially suffers as a result.

[Home](#)

- [World](#)
- [U.S.](#)
- [N.Y. / Region](#)

- [Business](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Automobiles](#)
- [Back to Top](#)

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