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WIRELESS PHILADELPHIA

Editorial | A WiFi winner

Just a few weeks ago, the city's technology czar Dianah L. Neff was getting worked over by City Council members who were worried about Mayor Street's plan to turn Philadelphia into the nation's largest municipal wireless hot spot.

Now, Neff's project looks to be a sure thing - with the selection of a company to build the wireless system, at its own expense, no less. What's more, the project just was cited by National Geographic Traveler magazine as one of the main reasons to consider Philly "The Next Great City."

At the Sept. 14 hearing, Council members peppered Neff with questions about the finances and logistics of the project, which will blanket the city's 135 square miles with a high-speed Internet signal. That would allow people outdoors to surf the Net almost anywhere in the city; indoors, you'd have to pay to get the signal, but it would be cheaper than most cable or DSL access.

Was it affordable? Would the city-related nonprofit, Wireless Philadelphia, attract enough paying customers? Or would taxpayers be on the hook for the \$15 million to \$20 million cost to build the wireless network?

At the same session, worried cable and Internet company executives took their shots, too. In testimony, they all but patted Neff patronizingly on the head, saying the city should leave the "competitive, challenging and risky business" to the pros in the field, i.e. them.

Last week, Wireless Philadelphia responded to critics and doubters alike. It not only selected a solid corporate partner, Atlanta-based Earthlink, to build the city's wireless network; the nonprofit group headed by Neff also secured an offer from Earthlink to finance the construction.

The arrangement, once signed and sealed, means Wireless Philadelphia won't have to float up to \$20 million in bonds to cover the cost of building the network.

As originally planned, the agency was going to repay bond holders with revenues from Internet subscriptions. If, for some reason, too few city residents signed up for Internet service, the plan would be in trouble.

Now Earthlink assumes that risk, but company officials are bullish on the project's appeal to customers. Earthlink will manage the network, charging other Internet service providers a fee to offer subscriptions over the system. Fees will range from \$10 per month for low-income households, to \$20 for others.

Wireless Philadelphia will put fees earned from Earthlink toward bridging the so-called digital divide: It plans to purchase computers for low-income city households, and to provide computer training. It's good business as well as good policy; it increases the customer base at the same time it puts into people's hands a key tool of modern citizenship.

The national buzz over Philadelphia's ground-breaking Internet effort has been great. ("One of the more ambitious wireless plans on Earth," National Geographic Traveler said.) As the mechanics of making the network a reality fall into place, Wireless Philadelphia looks more and more worthy of all the hype.