
Putting Web within reach

By Hiawatha Bray

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A deal between the City of Boston and Internet provider Comcast Corp. will deliver low-cost broadband Internet service to at least 2,800 low-income Boston residents.

Residents who graduate from a trio of federally funded computer training programs will be eligible for broadband service for \$10.95 a month in the first year, and \$15.95 a month for a second year — substantially cheaper than Comcast's standard prices.

"It starts us on the way to everybody having access to technology and the ability to use it," said Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who joined US Senator John F. Kerry to unveil the low-cost service at the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center yesterday. The center already hosts a Comcast program that teaches Internet skills to low-income youngsters.

With a download speed of 3 million bits of data per second, the low-cost Comcast service is much slower than its highest-speed home Internet services. But it's fast enough for easy access to online services such as Web-based educational programs and job-hunting sites.

The percentage of residents with broadband access in Boston is already well above the national average. According to market research company Scarborough Research, 71 percent of adults in the metropolitan area have broadband service, compared to just 61 percent of all US adults. Only two cities rank higher than Boston: San Diego and Atlanta.

But Menino said that's not good enough. "We're ahead of the country in being wired, but how many people have been left behind?" he said. "I want everybody to have access."

The Comcast broadband discounts will benefit graduates of three city programs that teach computer skills to schoolchildren and their families, as well as senior citizens and unemployed people. About 2,800 people are set to graduate this year from the programs, which are funded by a \$4.3 million grant received last September as part of the federal government's economic stimulus package. William Oates, Boston's chief information officer, said another 2,400 will pass through the program next year, and that the city is talking to Comcast about whether those graduates will also get the Internet deal.

Those who complete the classes can purchase desktop personal computers or inexpensive netbook laptops from the city for \$50, so they can stay connected to the Internet. Menino said the city expects to issue 1,300 subsidized netbooks over the two-year life of the program.

But even after getting cheap computers, the missing component was broadband Internet access, which is still beyond the financial reach of many residents. Deb Socia, chairwoman of OpenAirBoston, a nonprofit group that runs one of the training programs, said the participants represent households with a median income of \$18,000 a year. Such families can ill afford to pay full price for broadband Internet service. Comcast, for instance, charges \$26.95 a month for broadband, but only if the customer has also signed up for telephone or cable TV service. The company's price for broadband alone is \$41.95 a month.

Socia said the high cost of broadband is one reason her program offers netbooks to graduates, as the lightweight computers can be carried to public places where free wireless Internet access is available. "We identified for them all the wireless hotspots in the city," Socia said.

Five years ago, Boston began work on a low-cost, citywide, wireless Internet service. In cooperation with Galaxy Internet Services Inc. of Newton, the city has set up service in the Grove Hall and Dudley Square neighborhoods that is available for \$9.95 a month, but Menino has given up on the idea of covering all of Boston. "It died," the mayor said, adding that it was too difficult to find financial sponsors. "It hasn't fulfilled the optimism we had. We've got to go another way."

So Menino last year began urging Comcast to provide discounted Internet services to low-income graduates of the city's computer training programs. "I was a pain in the neck on it," Menino said.

"We started talking to the mayor about this last summer, and we enthusiastically embraced his concept," said Steve Hackley, Comcast's senior vice president of the Greater Boston region.

Revealed along with the broadband discount was the Comcast Digital Connectors program, which will provide computer training to about 40 low-income middle school, high school, and college students at three Boston community centers. Participants must volunteer to teach other young people the computer skills they learn. In exchange, they receive a netbook computer free of charge. Similar programs are already underway in Atlanta, Denver, Miami, Philadelphia, and Springfield, Mass.

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