

Roll over?



8:00 pm, March 28, 2010

Google's search all about speed

Remove red tape, potential network hosts told

By [Dustin Walsh](#)

Last month, **Google Inc.** announced it would install “experimental” ultrahigh speed broadband networks in several cities throughout the country. Ann Arbor, Royal Oak, Birmingham, Troy, Rochester Hills and Detroit are all vying to receive Google's fiber network — expected to be 100 times faster than common home networks. The networks would potentially serve at least 50,000 and up to 500,000 residents, businesses and municipal government agencies.

But behind the hype of city-sponsored **Facebook** pages and grassroots support rallies are infrastructure-based questions and economic strategies for each competing community.

Efficient install

Above all, Google is interested in deploying its network quickly and efficiently, said Erin Fors, partner in San Francisco-based **Cutline Communications** and Google spokesperson.

For Google, that means cities with the least amount of red tape and permit protocols stand a better chance.

Ownership of utility poles could influence Google's decision, said Donald Welch, president and CEO of Ann Arbor-based **Merit Network Inc.**, a nonprofit dedicated to implementing a network between public universities, libraries and government agencies that has 1,600 miles of fiber-optic lines throughout the state.

“There are different rules depending on the city and who owns them,” he said. “Getting **DTE (Energy Co.)** on board to help out would be very important for a city wanting Google fiber.”

In Ann Arbor, DTE owns the utility poles. However, DTE has committed to supporting the A2 fiber effort, said Dan Rainey, the city's director of information technology.

“The fastest way to deploy this is to hang them on telephone poles,” he said. “But we know they are looking to experiment with different options.”

Google has stated via its Google fiber site that it's not ruling out innovative ways to lay its network. And the state's **Metropolitan Extension Telecommunications Rights-of-Way Oversight Act** would provide Google with the public right of way to access easements and waterways under, and above, the city streets to lay its network. The act's purpose is to help telecommunications providers get speedy approvals for high-speed Internet connections.

Advertisement



"Really, we have no idea how Google is going to deliver this service," said Mark Miller, acting assistant city manager, who applied for the network. "They have the right to use all of our resources, so all we can do is lay out all of the information."

Google has stated it plans to build, deploy and fund the network independently, but it is not ruling out the use of existing fiber infrastructure, Rainey said. In Ann Arbor, **University of Michigan** and Merit already have laid out an expansive fiber network throughout the community.

"We have a large in-ground fiber network already that is city- and university-owned," he said. "Under the right circumstances, those assets can be made available (to Google)."

For **Wayne State University's TechTown**, Detroit is the most optimal test ground for Google's experimental network, said Vita Merlotti, SmartStart support leader.

Detroit has residents and businesses with high levels of connectivity just blocks away from entire areas with no connectivity, she said.

"Detroit is the perfect pilot zone," she said. "They would have a microcosm in one location for what they'll see in rural America and the highly connected urban areas."

What it all could mean

David St. John, spokesperson for the nonprofit **Fiber to the Home Council**, said Google is looking to capitalize on the public sector's ability to advance technology through its network.

"Everybody has realized that advancement is a constant game of leapfrog between bandwidth and applications," he said. "Imagine what we can do now versus when we had dial-up."

Welch said Google likely will look at cities with the ability to prototype the next generation of Internet services — in which Google wants a stake.

"I'm guessing a university, like UM, would be a really important aspect to them," he said. "Students are quick and tech savvy and have led us into whole new worlds on the Internet."

Google fiber also could cause a business boom for Lansing-based **AriaLink**.

Google is creating an open network, which would allow Internet service providers to use Google's network — including Comcast and AT&T.

While Google's service won't be limited to homes, a substantial number of its fiber connections will be to the home. This allows Aria-Link, which employs 40, to procure Google's potential network and bring its broadband service into thousands of homes without the cost of laying its own fiber — which costs \$40,000 to \$50,000 per mile, according to Jason Schreiber, the company's president.

"It's not economically feasible for us to make that kind of investment," he said. "If Google makes the investment here, we can take our service into homes and become a major competitor."

Royal Oak has a high concentration of residential property — about 90 percent, said Scott Newman, Royal Oak's manager of

information services.

"We definitely have a consumer market for it here in Royal Oak," he said. "We have Comcast, Wide Open West and AT&T here already, and they wouldn't be here if there wasn't money to be made."

Royal Oak-based **William Beaumont Hospitals** also is supporting Royal Oak's bid.

Subra Sripada, Beaumont's vice president and chief information officer, said the hospital system's \$100 million medical record digitization effort would benefit from Google's network and provide advancement to the industry.

"We're on the cusp of making easy access of information a reality," he said. "Having a high-speed network could advance this technology and help the wellness of the entire community and beyond."

All the cities involved said Google fiber will boost economic development, making their city an attractive place to invest and grow.

"We already know this is a great economic tool for our community," said Troy's Miller. "We don't have a ton of resources, but we know that as work and home life blend more regularly for our residents, something like this would be a great benefit."

Birmingham, like Ann Arbor, is already home to a Google office. Tara Maguire, the city's geographic information system coordinator and the town's Google fiber lead, said this should help Birmingham's chances.

"We hope that will play into our favor," she said. "We've already worked with Google, and they already know what it's like to work with us."

Rochester and Rochester Hills teamed up for a joint effort. Bob Grace, director of management information systems for Rochester Hills, said the cities' central location between Detroit and Flint is an advantage.

"We are predominantly a bedroom community," he said. "We're in a good spot with the auto industry in Detroit and the emerging green industry in Flint."

Providing value to Google is what Detroit's hopes are riding on, said Merlotti.

"It would benefit us and Google," she said. "In this particular corridor (Midtown), we see value in the community and private sectors. We are incubating and accelerating technologies that could benefit, and Google could really help business grow."