

Highland Park now has hot spots

City 1st in Chicago area to have free Wi-Fi hookup

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Sitting in a park in downtown Highland Park, Los Angeles businessman Amir Goldenberg surfed the Internet on his laptop computer for directions to his next appointment.

"I'm Mapquesting right now," Goldenberg, 25, said as he logged on to Highland Park's free wireless Internet service at Port Clinton Square on a recent afternoon. "It's nice to be able to do this outdoors, plus it's convenient."

City officials launched the experimental hot spot in June, making the North Shore community the first in the Chicago area and only the second in Illinois to offer outdoor broadband service to people visiting its central business district.

Wi-Fi, or wireless fidelity, allows users to connect to the Internet without having to plug their computers into a telephone line.

Nationwide, more than 50 cities and counties offer free public Wi-Fi hot spots, including Rockford, and another 60 municipal hot spots are in the works, including in Milwaukee and Aurora, industry officials say. Chicago is studying the service.

Highland Park has one of the highest Internet-user rates on the North Shore, according to city officials, who believe providing a hot spot will heat up business at local shops, restaurants and entertainment businesses.

"It adds another amenity to our downtown," said Ryan Waller, an assistant in the city manager's office who oversaw the project.

City officials also believe the service will help keep people in the downtown area longer.

"Now people won't have to run home or back to the office to be able to send an e-mail or surf the Net," Councilman Jim Kirsch said. "They can go outside on a park bench and do it."

Highland Park's pilot project took more than three years to launch as the city wrote ordinances and hired a service provider.

Highland Park chose a Libertyville-based company called DB3 for the four-month pilot project for about \$14,000, city officials said.

If the hot spot proves popular, the city will consider extending the service indefinitely and possibly expanding its reach.

Currently, it's available in two places: Port Clinton Square, a square-block area between Central and Laurel Avenues on the north and south and 1st and 2nd streets on the east and west; and another square-block area west of Port Clinton Square, near the Metra station and the city's central business district parking garage.

Each location has a "hot-spot antenna" that can pick up a computer signal from 1,000 to 1,500 feet away, said Dan Belmont, DB3's general manager.

"The range will vary based on the customer's equipment," Belmont said. "Someone with a laptop with a strong wireless connection can get on from 1,500 feet away, but someone with a Palm device might just be able to get it from a couple hundred feet away."

Since its June 16 debut, an estimated 100 different users have used the free service. Officials expect the number to keep rising as word about its availability spreads.

Highland Park recently publicized the service in its monthly newsletter and posted information on its Web site with instructions for how to sign on.

"With everyone walking around with laptops and Palm Pilots and Blackberries, it's just going to get more popular," Belmont said. "That's why all these communities are abuzz about it."

Before connecting to the city's wireless network, called "free HP WiFi," visitors are required to fill out a short survey so the city can determine who is using the service, for how long and at what times.

The network's introductory "splash page" also warns that the network is not a secure site, so no confidential or personal financial information should be shared online.

But it doesn't contain a warning that Waller could have used recently as he sat in Port Clinton Square to demonstrate how the new service works on his laptop.

"My batteries just went dead," he said.

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Using the service

What you'll need: A Wi-Fi compliant 802.11b/g wireless Ethernet device in your laptop or other device with Wi-Fi capability. Users must have Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol enabled.

Signing on: Set your system to connect using a wireless adapter. (Instructions on how to set up a wireless adapter vary depending on the brand and model of the wireless network card inside your computer or PDA.)

Select the network: Set your network connection to auto-detect wireless service. Select the wireless network labeled "free HP WiFi" from the list provided. Open your browser. Review and complete the requested information contained on the introductory page. Once completed, you will be able to use the Internet.

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