

## Universal Internet Access – Not Just A Campaign Theme

by Marcus A. Banks

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In one way -- a big way -- it would be difficult to call Andrew Rasiej's campaign for public advocate a success: He got five percent of the vote in the Democratic primary in September. Nobody was surprised, since he had no experience as a public official or even a candidate, his opponents were far better-known, and he built his entire campaign based on a single issue that many said has nothing to do with the office for which he was running. He said that there should be "a universal low-cost wireless Internet system for all New Yorkers," including [free wireless service in public spaces](#).

On the other hand, the city recently announced plans to [provide free wireless access](#) in ten parks, including eight locations in Central Park. And New York City Councilmember Gale Brewer, head of the council's Technology in Government Committee, is taking up where Rasiej left off, pushing for a task force to figure out how to provide affordable [broadband Internet access](#) to every city resident, business and non-profit organization.

Both Rasiej and Brewer argue that increasing Internet connectivity is essential to improving the lives of city residents and to enhancing the city's economic competitiveness. A primary goal of Brewer's efforts is to reduce the cost of in-home broadband Internet access, so that more New Yorkers will take advantage of these capabilities.

Only an estimated 38 percent of New Yorkers currently have broadband access, but an ever-higher percentage of Internet content (such as video) [requires this capability](#). The "digital divide" between higher and lower income communities may never be closed completely, but municipal broadband and wireless initiatives represent a concerted attempt to narrow this gap.

The city's broadband task force has not yet been formed. The Technology in Government Committee has held an initial hearing, and plans to hold a second hearing in November.

Many other US cities have charged similar task forces with providing direction for broadband/wireless development, including [Los Angeles, Seattle, and Philadelphia](#).

Indeed Rasiej held up the "Wireless Philadelphia" initiative as his [model](#). Philadelphia has moved more aggressively than any other US city to develop a [city-wide wireless network](#)

. Using Philadelphia's business plan, Rasiej estimated that the cost of establishing a wireless network in New York is [\\$80 million](#)

(PDF). In fact, though, Philadelphia did not even determine the vendor for its wireless network until early October, three weeks after Rasiej's campaign came to an end with the primary.

Philadelphia now has chosen Earthlink to build its network, and the company has offered to

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build and manage it at no cost to city residents. The city and Earthlink will share any [revenue](#) that emerge from the project. Search engine titan Google recently offered to construct a wireless network for San Francisco

[at no cost to the city](#)

. Similarly, Rasiej argues that

[private companies](#)

should pay the cost for building a wireless network in New York. Although it is too early to know whether all of these funding approaches will materialize, the early trend in municipal wireless development is for intensive private investment.

If private companies did not expect to make a profit from wireless networks, they would not want to build them. The most obvious source of revenue is new forms of advertising, which could conceivably be tailored to specific individuals based upon their Internet browsing patterns. There is a definite potential for a loss of personal privacy unless municipal broadband/wireless projects are [carefully developed](#). Municipalities that undertake these projects should plan to develop educational campaigns about how to protect confidential information online.

Although privacy concerns are legitimate, they are not severe enough to prevent further broadband/wireless development in New York City. There are too many potential benefits for the city:

1. More timely access to life-saving information for emergency responders, who could download this information over wireless networks en route to the scene of an accident
2. Greater involvement of residents in the work of city government
3. Better ability of children to study at home, and to communicate with their teachers about what they discover online

As New York City embarks on a more comprehensive approach to broadband and wireless development, important questions remain unanswered, but there is little doubt that, sooner or later, one way or another, it's going to happen.

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