

Eagan leads state in quest for high-speed Internet access

Eagan leads state in quest for high-speed Internet access

BY FREDERICK MELO - http://www.twincities.com/localnews/ci_7207831?nclick_check=1

Pioneer Press

Article Last Updated: 10/17/2007 11:03:53 PM CDT

As Minnesota cities go, Eagan is pretty high-tech, offering widespread cable and DSL access to the Internet.

That's not nearly enough.

Not when a video from YouTube.com can bog down even a high-speed connection with millions of bits of information.

Cities like Eagan readily admit their counterparts in places like South Korea and northern Europe aren't just surpassing them, they're lapping them in terms of the amount of data their telecommunications infrastructures can transfer per second.

"Right now, we're (at) megabits. And they're gigabits," said Drew Gorton, founder of Gorton Studios, an Eagan-based Web site development company.

Eagan - already considered one of the state's standard-bearers for Internet connectivity - hopes to someday offer businesses and residents world-class Internet access and transfer speeds. In February, the City Council passed a resolution making that an official priority.

Exactly how the city will go about its goal is still being mapped out, but state officials have taken notice and are encouraging other Minnesota cities to follow Eagan's lead.

On Thursday, the House Telecommunications Regulation and Infrastructure Division held its weekly meeting at Eagan's City Hall. Dozens attended, including representatives of Thomson West, Frontier Communications, Northwest Airlines, Monticello, the Red Wing Port Authority, Dakota County and St. Paul.

They encouraged the state to set clear broadband goals.

Under a bill circling the Legislature, high-speed Internet would be available statewide by the year 2015 at one gigabit per second. That's fast enough to download a full-length movie in less than eight seconds.

"Here in Eagan, we've identified an issue for our business community and our citizens that resonates throughout the state," Eagan Mayor Michael Maguire said in an interview. "The goal here in Eagan is really to understand high-speed and broadband as the next big utility."

Maguire said he has heard from small-business owners in his city who have been quoted costs of \$3,000 by local telecom companies to complete a mile of underground Internet cable to their location.

In 2005, however, the city convinced Quest to extend its DSL, or digital subscriber lines. That expanded optional high-speed Internet coverage from 45 percent of the city to 90 percent.

But with Internet applications like high-definition television and video-conferencing on the horizon, it still might not be enough to meet future needs.

"Minnesota's median upload speed is seven times slower than Japan ... and a little slower than the U.S. in general," said Rick King, chief operating officer of the legal software publishing giant Thomson West, which is based in Eagan.

Tamara Rath, an infrastructure director with Northwest Airlines, said a better network would allow employees to download manuals and other large files at home, saving mailing costs. Even call center employees could work from home. The savings in building costs might be an incentive for companies not to move operations abroad.

Around the country, major telecom providers have winced as cities have proposed ways to boost Internet access and transfer speeds. Officials said many telecoms operate virtual monopolies and fear competition, or feel shortchanged after investing millions in the infrastructure themselves.

Jeff O'Neill, city administrator in Monticello, said the major telecoms in his city were resistant to offering high-speed connections to anything but new development. So Monticello is proceeding without them.

On Sept. 18, 74 percent of voters approved a ballot question allowing the city to own and operate its own telephone exchange, the first step toward establishing a citywide fiber-optic network serving every home and business.

The first few homes and businesses could be connected by summer 2009.

Frederick Melo can be reached at fmelo@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-2172.