

Minneapolis approves free wireless service for agencies working to bridge digital divide

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In its continuing efforts to make Minneapolis a wireless city that bridges the digital divide, the City Council approved 51 applications for Wireless Community accounts, which are free wireless Internet accounts for non-profit organizations that provide free computer access to the public. The free accounts will be good through 2010.

“It is not enough to just invest in state of the art wireless Internet technology, we also have to make sure that more people than ever can have access to that technology,” said Mayor R.T. Rybak. “These free wireless Internet accounts are a great example of how we are going above and beyond what other communities have done to deliver Internet access to our residents and businesses.”

“We are very fortunate that the wireless network allows us the unique opportunity to fund programs that help bridge the digital divide,” said City Council Member Elizabeth Glidden, who is a member of the Digital Inclusion Fund Advisory Board. “By increasing free access to technology and educating more people on how to use it, we can give them the skills necessary to get a good education, a good job and access to the information and services they need online to improve their lives.”

The Wireless Community accounts were awarded to agencies that provide public computer access, technology literacy training, and/or technology support for underserved communities. Applications were reviewed by the City of Minneapolis staff and the Digital Inclusion Advisory Board, which made recommendations to the City Council on Aug. 20 regarding which organizations will receive free accounts. The selected agencies will also receive free monthly subscription vouchers that they can use to recruit volunteers who can assist with staffing and training in their community technology centers. In total, \$15,000 in free service vouchers will be distributed, in addition to the free accounts.

Later this year, City staff will complete a second call for applications, with targeted outreach to groups that serve people with disabilities, seniors, charter schools, and agencies/organizations that serve populations or geographic areas.

The Wireless Community accounts are the latest examples of how Minneapolis residents are benefiting from the robust community benefits agreement negotiated between the City of Minneapolis and USI Wireless, the company that built, owns and manages the wireless network throughout Minneapolis.

Other community benefits include:

- \$400,000 in grants that have helped local organizations increase technology access and digital literacy to the communities they serve.
- A “Civic Garden” that provides a free level of service for anyone who can receive the USI Wireless signal.
- Five percent of the Minneapolis area (including some parks and plazas) designated as free wireless zones.

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The City of Minneapolis' public-private partnership with USI Wireless is being held up as a model for how cities and businesses can work together to make the notion of a "wireless city" a reality, and at the same time to improve government services and bridge the digital divide