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Plans for citywide wireless network to be unveiled

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Milwaukee officials will announce today that a local company plans to invest between \$20 million and \$25 million in creating a citywide wireless computer network, which would put the city at the forefront of a national push to create such systems.

The proposal, which would come at no cost to city taxpayers, is from Milwaukee-based Midwest Fiber Networks. The firm needs permission to use city-owned underground conduits to establish the system, which would allow residents to access the Internet from virtually any location. They would need a computer with a wireless network card.

A Common Council committee is expected this morning to grant authority to allow officials to negotiate such a deal with the company.

"This is an exciting proposition for the city," said Mayor Tom Barrett, who has had informal discussions with the company. He said it could lead to Milwaukee being the "first American city to become totally wireless at no cost to the taxpayers of the city."

Two years ago, with financial support from two companies, the city established free wireless areas — also known as Wi-Fi zones, for "wireless fidelity" — in two downtown parks. In addition, such "hot spots" have become a common fixture at local coffeehouses and other locations. Wireless service is also available by subscription, through companies such as Verizon Wireless.

In recent months, several large cities — including San Francisco, Philadelphia, Houston and Portland, Ore. — have said they are moving ahead with such systems. Financing for the systems has taken on different forms, with some attracting national sponsors, such as Google.

Midwest Fiber Networks would undergo a major expansion to complete the project, including training city residents for the task, according to Sharon Robinson, head of the city's Department of Administration.

In general, users of such systems pay a monthly fee for access, as they do for other Internet access such as cable or digital subscriber lines to a home or office. With a user name and password, as well wireless capability on their computer, they are able to access the system from anywhere.

In a letter to council members, Mayor Tom Barrett says the plan would be "at no cost to the city and taxpayers." Midwest Fiber Networks has or will line up partners that will include "high-profile international service providers and equipment manufacturers" to share in the cost, according to the letter, provided to the Journal Sentinel.

It would not be an exclusive deal, meaning competing firms or partnerships could create similar systems.

The council's Finance and Personnel Committee is to be briefed on the plan later this morning. Its members will be asked to approve a resolution that authorizes city officials to negotiate a deal with the company that will allow access to the underground conduits.

It is unclear what form of compensation the city would get, though it could be a rental charge or come in the form of free access in city parks, housing developments or other areas. In Philadelphia, city officials sought free access to the system within city parks.