

Madison eyes public broadband system to compete with private sector

By [Rick Barrett](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Madison would become the largest Wisconsin city to have a municipal broadband service, competing with commercial Internet providers, if backers of the idea are successful.

Under one approach, the city would create and operate a broadband system much like a city-run utility. Alternatively, it could partner with a private-sector broadband provider to offer the service.

Either way, some Madison officials are keenly interested in joining the ranks of U.S. cities that have some of the fastest-available Internet speeds delivered over fiber-optic cable systems.

"We want to be in a league with Chattanooga (Tenn.) and Kansas City," Madison Mayor Paul Soglin said Monday, adding that he favors a municipal broadband system.

American cities, Soglin said, can't afford to "wait and hope" that Google or AT&T will develop a high-speed broadband network in a particular community.

"There's no question about it ... a municipality can play a role in this," Soglin said.

Madison has broadband service available from AT&T, Charter Communications and TDS Telecom. However the speeds aren't as fast as they would be with fiber-optic cable covering the entire city, according to Barry Orton, chairman of the city's Digital Technology Committee.

Madison has hired a national consulting firm, [CTC Technology & Energy](#), to do a feasibility study on whether to build a broadband network based on the city's existing fiber-optic cable system that serves city buildings and schools.

The goal would be to provide ultrafast broadband anywhere in Madison including the poorest neighborhoods, Orton said.

"What Madison is interested in doing, as a lot of cities are, is running fiber (cable) directly to any home or business that wants it," he said.

Madison's feasibility study should be completed by June, followed by a recommendation from the Digital Technology Committee submitted to the Common Council for its approval.

The cost of building and operating a citywide service won't be known until the study is finished.

"Then we will know, more specifically, how close we are to reality, how much capital would have to be spent, and the subsidy needed," Orton said.

If city officials approved the plan, construction would begin in about two years. High-speed Internet could be made available to every home and business in the city, through fiber-optic cable to the premises, although where the service is installed would depend on the demand for it.

"It's not like water, where the city puts in a pipe to every home no matter what," Orton said.

Under Wisconsin law, a number of criteria must be met before a city can offer Internet service that competes with private-sector providers.

A few Wisconsin municipalities, including the City of Reedsburg, offer broadband and cable TV services.

Some local governments have forged agreements with broadband providers, allowing the providers to use public towers as platforms for broadband transmitters.

Milwaukee has some city-operated wireless hot spots for Internet access, but most city residents and businesses have broadband service from AT&T or Time Warner Cable.

The telecom industry says government should get out of the way, rather than get involved, in broadband service.

Advances come from the private sector rather than taxpayer-funded projects, said Bill Esbeck, executive director of the Wisconsin State Telecommunications Association.

Esbeck questions why Madison needs a municipal broadband system when it already has service from multiple providers.

"Madison is one of the most wired communities in our state. I am not sure what options exist to increase availability," he said.

Chattanooga, Tenn., has received international attention for its municipal broadband network, which was completed in 2009 and has helped the city attract technology companies.

Chattanooga's network is the byproduct of a \$300 million electric utility upgrade that received \$111 million in federal stimulus funds. Some have called it a success, while others have said it's a public boondoggle.

"If anyone is looking at Chattanooga as the gold standard, I would strongly suggest that they wait for the final chapters of the story to be written. There have been many examples of municipal networks that have been held out as the next great thing for broadband access and availability, and many of them have failed miserably," Esbeck said.

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