

Calif. City Gets Free Wi-Fi Via High Tech Meters

Martha Mendoza, AP National Writer

SANTA CLARA, Calif. (AP) — The city of Santa Clara flipped on a big Internet switch this week, becoming what it says is the first in the country to use wireless, digital "smart meters" on homes as channels for free citywide outdoor Wi-Fi.

"This is just one of the major benefits our community will enjoy as a result of our advanced metering technology," said John Roukema, director of Silicon Valley Power, the community's utility provider. "Now our residents, visitors and local workforce can get Internet access while waiting for a train, shopping downtown, getting their car washed or relaxing in their yard."

Like cities around the U.S., Santa Clara's electric meters are being systematically replaced, house by house, with high tech ones, eliminating the need for meter readers to manually check each one every month but raising concerns about health effects, privacy and cost.

The new meters send electricity and water usage reports via wireless network, but in Santa Clara, a city of 118,000 in the heart of the Silicon Valley, they also have an unusual separate channel that provides free, outdoor Internet.

Sascha Meinrath, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Open Technology Institute, said using meters as Internet channels is a "a real Faustian bargain," a smart use of technology that will require "privacy protections that are second to none."

"If they do privacy right, residents have nothing to do but rejoice," he said. "If they don't, you could see some serious malfeasance down the road."

Many communities already have pockets of limited free Wi-Fi, but until now those services are mostly either centered around public hotspots like parks, hospitals or libraries or offered by major tech firms like Google, which provides Wi-Fi throughout its headquarters city of Mountain View.

Google also recently rolled out New York City's biggest contiguous free public Wi-Fi in the Chelsea neighborhood, where the company has a campus.

"Being online is no longer the luxury that we once considered it to be. It's essential. Society at large requires an internet connection," said Zach Leverenz, CEO of Connect2Compete, a national organization which joined with the FCC last week to roll out a nationwide initiative called "Everyone On." Their goal is to provide free

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digital literacy training, affordable Internet service and low-cost computers to the 100 million people nationwide who do not currently have Internet access at home.

"The costs of digital exclusion — of not having access to Internet at home — are rising every day," said outgoing FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski, an advocate of free Wi-Fi as he launched the "Everyone On" campaign. "Offline Americans are missing out on opportunities in education, health care, and employment."

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