



Wireless Oakland Status

February 1, 2011

For several years, Oakland County has worked in support of a strategy to create public-private partnerships so that some level of free internet service could be provided to the constituents of Oakland County in exchange for access to government assets. Initially, this strategy, implemented as Wireless Oakland, resulted in a twelve month pilot, where 17,000 households had access to free wireless internet and over 50 million minutes of free internet were consumed. However, due to one of the most difficult economic times Michigan and the Nation had ever seen, the County's former private sector partner was unable to secure funding to continue providing and expanding service to County residents.

Since then, County staff has continued efforts to implement the Wireless Oakland strategy and leverage the framework put in place to support Wireless Oakland. In 2009, the federal government indicated that there would be American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding available to increase broadband availability and adoption in the United States. Seeing the synergy between the high level goals set forth for the use of the federal funding and Wireless Oakland, the County provided extensive testimony to attempt to influence the development of the rules so that all Oakland County residents could benefit from the funding. In the end, the rules were written in such a way that only those residents in the rural areas of the County could benefit from the funding designated for expanding broadband service, and there would be limited funding to for programs designed to increase adoption in urban and suburban areas. Working within the constraints set by the federal government, County staff pursued partnerships to attempt to ensure the interests of all County residents were represented in efforts to obtain federal funding.

Those efforts have resulted in a potential partnership to support the efforts of Air Advantage, a Michigan based telecommunications company. Air Advantage was awarded \$65 million in grants and loans from the Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP). The funding will be used to provide broadband service to un-served and underserved rural communities in the Thumb and portions of Southeast Michigan. The funding awarded to Air Advantage will allow them to build the infrastructure needed to provide broadband internet service in their proposed service area. Due to the County's continued efforts to forge partnerships with Internet Service Providers, the Air Advantage proposal included every portion of Oakland County that met the qualifications for the BIP funding.

More specifically, the Air Advantage application for BIP funds included some or all of the following Oakland County communities: Addison Township, Brandon Township, Groveland Township, Highland Township, Holly Township, Lyon Township, Milford Township, Independence Township, Oakland Township, Oxford Township, Rose Township, Springfield Township and White Lake Township. Air Advantage will be one of the only companies to provide broadband services to Oakland County residents in these areas, bringing those residents this much needed critical infrastructure.

To facilitate the provision of this service to Oakland County residents, representatives from the County and Air Advantage have proposed an opportunity where the County would provide space on County towers that would traditionally be leased, in exchange for services to be provided directly to County residents.

Specifically, in exchange for space on County towers, Air Advantage has agreed to create of free “WiFi” hotspots in downtowns within or near Air Advantage’s Oakland County service area. The services would equate to, or exceed the value of the space on County assets and towers. In these traditionally underserved areas the provision of both the basic infrastructure and a free component would greatly contribute to the local economy.

After Air Advantage’s initial implementation, which is scheduled to be complete in 2013, they have indicated a potential interest in expanding services further into Oakland County. This expansion of service would result in often requested competition in the remainder of the County, and therefore provide additional options for citizens choose from when selecting their broadband service provider.

The Wireless Oakland program originally had two additional goals, with the second being to provide PC’s and technical/technology training to the public to further promote access to computers and enhance their technical skills. County staff has continued to seek methods and partnerships to bring this goal to fruition, and achieved success through a partnership with Michigan State University (MSU). MSU compiled an application for ARRA funds to increase computer capacity in libraries across the state. County staff worked diligently to poll all the libraries in the County to determine their interest in participation, and ensured that those that were interested were included in the MSU application, which was awarded the requested funding.

Through these efforts, Oakland County libraries will receive additional computers that will represent more than a 25% increase in computer capacity for participating libraries. More specifically, the 36 libraries had 743 computers, and this funding will add 195 computers for a total of 943 computers. This application was submitted for the first round of funding, and represented an investment of \$195,000 for Oakland County libraries. MSU also requested funding in a second round, and received \$448,000 that will be targeted specifically toward City of Pontiac libraries, public housing centers, and other computer centers.

On the training side of this goal, Oakland County also applied for and received US Department of Labor funding to pilot a program that would provide the technical training required to retool unemployed automotive engineers as defense engineers. Under this program, the County partnered with Lawrence Technological University (LTU) and was awarded \$195,000 to cover the cost of the program for 25 Oakland County residents. In total, the efforts of County staff on the second goal of Wireless Oakland resulted in over \$830,000 worth of investment in technology and training for Oakland County residents.

The third and final goal of Wireless Oakland was to develop a Technology Planning Toolkit, which was completed in the Spring of 2009. This Toolkit is a guidebook to assist local government agencies within Oakland County as they embrace the knowledge economy and update their community processes to encourage technology firms to locate in their community. The Toolkit includes observations, recommendations, practical techniques, and model language for communities to use in reviewing and modifying their plans, policies, ordinances and procedures.

Increasing availability, awareness and technological literacy for Oakland County governments and citizens is a crucial step in creating knowledge-based economy and workforce. By continuing to support the overarching goals of the Wireless Oakland initiative, the County hopes to not only overcome the digital divide but, also to achieve a new age of innovation.