

Should Portland have publicly owned internet?

On the heels of the FCC's ruling on net neutrality, advocates have renewed their efforts for a city-owned internet utility

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Organizers behind a new campaign want the city to lay and operate its own fiber optic network to ensure that all city residents have access to an open and free internet.

Municipal Broadband PDX wants the city to become an internet service provider that operates like any other public utility. The group plans to hold its first public rally at City Hall this Sunday.

Campaign organizers believe that if Portland were to have its own public internet utility, it would protect users and businesses from the censorship and paid prioritization that have become a threat since the Federal Communications Commission recently repealed its net neutrality rules. That repeal is being challenged in court and in Congress.

Members of the Municipal Broadband PDX campaign include people working in technology, government and advocacy. This includes Russell Senior, president of Personal Telco Project, a nonprofit that's been providing free wireless hotspots around Portland since the start of the millennium.

"The problem is larger than net neutrality, it's a cost thing," said Senior. "Every year we have a cable service, it's like \$1,000 going out the window."

He said that long after the upfront investment in building infrastructure has been recouped, cable companies continue to raise prices. But if internet service were a public utility, subscribers would ultimately pay less per month for higher quality service.

While in the past Portlanders have not shown a lot of support for internet service as a public utility, campaign spokesperson and game designer Garrett Hour thinks the tide has changed.

"Comcast has been providing awful, unreliable, expensive service, but we all just kind of got used to it," he said. "Now they have successfully lobbied to strip away our internet freedoms, and that's the point in which people are finally saying that they've had enough."

Hour and other campaign backers say if Portland had publicly owned internet service, consumers wouldn't have to worry about their internet provider selling their personal information, such as browsing history.

Another core principle of the campaign is to ensure a network that is accessible to all Portlanders. This would mean a pricing system that correlates with income and free Wi-Fi in public spaces and on public transportation, according to the campaign's website.

But the campaign may be in store for quite a fight if it gains any traction. In a state where Comcast has made \$1.4 million in campaign contributions to local politicians since 2007 – including to several members of Portland City Council – creating a public-owned internet service will be no easy feat.

That being said, it's not a new idea.

Building its own network is an idea the city looked into about 10 years ago, but determined would be too expensive. The upfront cost of roughly \$500 million would have been funded with revenue bonds.

In 2007, the city examined two options for collecting funds to pay for those bonds once the network was built: It could either sell access to any number of internet providers who shared the network, or the city could become the internet provider itself, charging individual households a monthly fee to connect.

"We decided not to move forward as the results of the study concluded it was too risky for taxpayers," said Brendan Finn, Commissioner Dan Saltzman's chief of staff. Saltzman's office was overseeing Portland's Office of Community Technology at the time.

While there is renewed support for re-examining the possibility of a city-built network among staffers at City Hall, there's less enthusiasm around the city becoming an internet service provider once it's built.

"There's a lot of things that public agencies do well. Being nimble competitors in fiercely competitive marketplaces is not what the public is good at," said Marshall Runkel, chief of staff to Commissioner Chloe Eudaly.

In the late 1990s, Runkel was the liaison to what is now the Office of Community Technology when he worked as an assistant to former city commissioner Erik Sten.

He said he was thrown into telecom policy when AT&T challenged in court Portland's right to require open access to its cable lines. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ultimately found that Portland did not have that right, but the case laid the groundwork for the net neutrality debate.

In the years that followed, Portland began to look at other options, such as contracting with an internet provider to build an open-access network or building such a network itself.

Infrastructure the city originally considered building would have connected each home to a cable network, costing roughly \$3,000 per home.

But Runkel said in the current market, it would make more sense to build a system that connected fiber optic cables to poles that would in turn send out wireless signal to the surrounding area. And that would come in with a significantly smaller price tag.

Hour suggested that Portland could have additional cost savings if it figured out a way to use pre-existing public infrastructure, such as along MAX routes.

While Commissioner Eudaly is supportive of revisiting plans to build an open access

network, Runkel said, "We don't have the organizational ability to have this conversation in a competent way right now."

That's because today the city's Office of Community Technology is a shell of its former self. He said the first step would be establishing a city office to oversee strategic technology.

But there are reasons why it's a conversation the city should be having.

"Right now access to the internet is 100 percent predicted by income," Runkel said, with a large percentage of the people left behind being kids that go to public schools and the elderly.

Secondly, he said, "as network owners are given more and more power, there is a threat to free speech, and there is a threat to innovation."

Additionally, an open-access network where providers had to compete with each other would spark innovation. Locally-owned internet service providers would pop up, bolstering the local economy, and consumers would have access to more options.

But the idea that Portland could go one step further and become an internet service provider itself is not so far fetched.

Portlanders need look no further than 20 miles southeast to Sandy, which has been operating its own broadband utility since 2003. Tacoma, Wash., also offers its residents quality internet service.

In these municipalities, subscribers pay anywhere from \$40 to \$75 per month for internet, depending upon speed. In Tacoma, the public utility Click! employs 90 people and offers combined internet and cable TV packages starting at \$52 per month.

Hour said he expects roughly 50 to 100 supporters will attend the campaign rally, which begins at 2 p.m. at City Hall this Sunday, Jan. 14. Those in attendance will hear from a variety of speakers before marching around downtown and returning to City Hall for more speeches.

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