

Editorial: Model project - Wireless system shows value of vision, goals

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Greenville's decision to pursue the installation of wireless Internet access downtown goes against the grain of conventional thinking. Cities such as San Francisco and Chicago have failed in their attempts to offer free access, and other municipalities have endured countless problems with similar projects.

Conversely, Greenville's modest progress in providing wireless access is considered a case study in how to set and achieve realistic goals in deploying a network in a city center. The City Council and staff should be commended for their vision in utilizing a reasonable investment in emerging technology to provide a valuable public service to residents.

In 2006, city leaders made the introduction of a wireless system a leading priority for the year. They set the ambitious but well reasoned goal for the project for establishing a citywide Internet service incrementally, determining the feasibility of that endeavor as well as the legal and financial ramifications of doing so and then installing a limited system in the downtown section of the city.

An investment of \$54,000 allows the city to offer free Internet access to an area that encompasses the center of the city, from Reade Circle north to the Tar River and from Pitt Street to Reade Street. Visitors, residents, business owners and state employees can access the wireless network in that area, enjoying connectivity unheard of only years ago.

The council began the groundwork for the project in early 2006, and the system went active about six months ago. Last week, the City Council received an update on its status, learning the past two months had seen 845 new users on the system. There were nearly 20,000 connections between Aug. 9 and Nov. 7.

Some may not view that effort as successful but usage has expanded without a marketing campaign and has exceeded predicted usage during a "debugging" phase. The city will now expand its effort to inform residents about the availability, and should expect the number of connections to increase considerably.

The promise of introducing a wireless network to an urban area is tremendous, but one that has proved difficult to realize. For instance, an effort to build such a system in San Francisco fell apart amid political gamesmanship. But Greenville and other cities — Providence, R.I., and Riverside, Calif., among them — may be demonstrating a path to success that embraces modest goals and works with providers to minimize risk and expense.

Free wireless Internet access will not be key to economic revitalization in Greenville, but it is part of a larger project that aims to profoundly change downtown. And it shows how vision and a modest investment can make great strides to improve this community for residents.