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# Broadband on the Block: What Would it Take to Hook up the Whole City?

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Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to make high-speed Internet universally accessible in New York City by 2025 has been taking shape over the past several months, first with the allocation of \$70 million in the executive budget to bring affordable broadband to more city residents over 10 years, then with the July announcement of a \$10 million program to make free Internet available to some 16,000 NYCHA residents in five housing projects starting next year.

From his first days in office, the mayor has stressed that affordable Internet should be fundamental to an equitable society—like running water or electricity. It should not be a privilege, as it is now, he said, with those who cannot access it placed at a serious disadvantage when it comes to seeking education and employment.

But de Blasio's goal is extremely ambitious; even though his sizeable monetary commitments go a long way toward giving his plan teeth, the fact remains that nearly 22 percent of New York City households—over 674,000 by the city's own calculus—do not currently have Internet access, according to the mayor's Center for Economic Opportunity. (Many have the option, but either cannot afford it or choose not to subscribe.) So while bringing free broadband to 16,000 people at a cost of \$10 million is admirable, the question is: what will it take to hook up the entire city?

**“Improving broadband access and speeds is a worthy goal, and these initiatives raise questions about the most cost-effective ways to achieve those goals,” said Maria Doulis, director of city studies at the Citizens Budget Commission, which has yet to delve into the potential cost of the mayor's broadband aspirations.**

The plan to bring free broadband to 16,000 NYCHA residents, which is being executed in conjunction with a broader Obama administration initiative to bring affordable Internet to federally assisted housing developments around the nation, is just the beginning, according to Maya Wiley, legal counsel to de Blasio.

“The first NYCHA wireless corridors are being done as ‘demonstration projects,’ which is a way for the city to inform future policy and procurement decisions,” Wiley said. “The mayor's office, NYCHA and the residents of these developments will work together to evaluate the projects to inform subsequent investments.”



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The city has yet to choose a vendor to provide Internet for the five developments, the first of which will be the Queensbridge North and Queensbridge South houses in Long Island City.

Some have questioned whether investing in broadband at NYCHA should even be the first priority, given the immense backlog of repairs for the authority's crumbling housing stock—a point Doulis thinks should be considered.

“Given the apparent cost-effectiveness of this spending, are there other capital investments that would produce more bang for the buck?” Doulis asked. “At NYCHA, for example, are capital resources best devoted to fixing critical issues long in need of repair?”

As for the \$70 million in the mayor's executive budget, nearly half is slated to be spent in the next two or three years to construct free or low-cost wireless corridors in underserved parts of the city, and to upgrade existing wireless networks, with an eye to expanding service to some 20,000 low-income households (40,000 to 50,000 residents). A few such networks already exist: A Wi-Fi corridor in Harlem, for example, brings “increased digital access” to nearly 80,000 residents, according to the city. Additionally, \$1.6 million will go to extending broadband to at least 500 businesses in industrial zones.

“The city expects to partner with wide range of organizations in the public and private sectors to create a network of networks that brings broadband within reach of more New Yorkers, whether in their homes or in public spaces,” Wiley said. “The method of procurement and vendors for all of these capital expenditures have not yet been determined.”

One thing that's certain is that the city is making a concerted effort to broaden the options in New York, which has long been limited to the services of a handful of giant cable companies. Earlier this year, the administration called out for innovative ideas to expand broadband access, and the response was enthusiastic, with the city receiving 69 proposals from 52 sources between April and June, according to Jeff Merritt, director of innovation in the Mayor's Office of Tech and Innovation.

“Submissions came from small and large companies, academic institutions, individuals and nonprofits, spanning six countries and a dozen states,” Merritt said. “The largest number ... came from small companies with under 50 employees, most of whom had not previously worked with the city of New York.”

“The Mayor's Office of Technology and Innovation is currently reviewing these proposals and gathering more information,” Merritt continued. “In addition to ideas related to the expansion of fiber-optic networks, the city received a range of promising proposals related to new or underutilized technologies such as mesh networking, point-to-point wireless, and leveraging new spectrum.”