

Mayor Gray wants Lexington to become a 'gigabit city'

HIGHLIGHTS

Mayor Jim Gray announced Tuesday that within the next six months the city will take the first steps in assessing new public-private partnerships or possibly solely private partnerships to build fiber optic infrastructure to improve the speed of the Internet in Kentucky's second-largest town.



By Beth Musgrave - bmusgrave@herald-leader.com

The city of Lexington will be making a push in coming months to increase sluggish Internet speed and expand access to more residents, city officials announced Tuesday.

Mayor Jim Gray said that within the next six months, the city will release a request for information to determine whether there is interest in a private-public partnership or commercial-only solution to build a fiber-optic network.

Gray said he wants the city to become a "gigabit city." Gigabit refers to speeds of 1,000 megabits per second. Lexington's average Internet speed is 16.2 megabits per second.

High-speed Internet is essential to recruiting and retaining businesses, Gray said.

"It's like what the railroad was in the 1860s," Gray said. "Think of where Lexington would be without Interstate 64 and Interstate 75. That's what we face if Lexington is not in the fast lane of the information superhighway."

Businesses that want to move to Lexington have repeatedly asked Gray's office and Commerce Lexington, the city's chamber group, about Internet speed. The answer: Not great.

Ookla, an Internet metrics company, said Lexington's 16.2 megabits per second ranks 38th of 96 Kentucky cities and towns where the Internet is available.

Scott Shapiro, an adviser to Gray who has been on a team looking at Lexington's Internet access for more than a year, said he tried to find Lexington on a chart that ranks the highest average Internet speed by city. "I couldn't find it," he said.

Gray said the project is looking at increasing not only speed but accessibility.

"We're going to be looking for partners who can create competition and who are willing to serve neighborhoods throughout Lexington," Gray said. "Increasing our Internet speed is crucial, but so is tackling the digital divide."

Councilman Kevin Stinnett said improving access for all residents could be more important than speed. Many school systems would like to move to more computer-based learning, but those systems often can't because not everyone has access to the Internet. There are some estimates showing that roughly one-third of Lexington residents don't have home Internet access.

"This is something that we should have done years ago," Stinnett said after a presentation about efforts to increase Internet speeds at Tuesday's Urban County Council Planning and Public Works Committee.

Aldona Valicenti, the city's chief information officer, is one of many city officials who have been meeting for more than a year to determine how to improve Lexington's broadband capacity and access.

Valicenti told the council Tuesday that the group has met with private Internet providers, including Time Warner, Windstream, and AT&T. Valicenti also has watched what other cities have done to increase their fiber-optic infrastructure and how those cities have paid for it.

"We think that there will definitely be interest," Valicenti said of the private sector. "Lexington is very desirable because it is dense and has a lot of people in a small area, which drives down costs."

It's difficult to put a timetable on when the city would start receiving bids; it depends on what is proposed, she said.

Valicenti said it's also difficult to say whether it will cost more for customers or if the city will be asked to pay upfront costs. Those questions can be answered after the city receives proposals from the private sector.

Valicenti said that there have been efforts to provide free Wi-Fi in some cities, but those cities found too many challenges with those projects for a variety of reasons. Most cities opting to increase Internet speeds are moving to installing fiber-optic lines.

Some cities have decided to put taxpayer money into fiber-optic networks.

Russellville, for example, bonded \$11 million through its utility company to increase Internet speeds to 4,300 households.

That's a big price tag for a limited number of households. But Russellville is now ranked first in the state in Internet speed and boasts that it is the first "gig" city in Kentucky.

Louisville recently awarded franchise options to three private companies to work at improving its Internet speeds. Valicenti said Lexington will be closely watching Louisville's project as it moves forward.

"Broadband availability will help and serve all of our citizens, businesses, students, entrepreneurs and graduates from our colleges and universities," Valicenti said. "We have been assessing the situation; it's time to act."

Roy Cornett, who attended Tuesday's meeting and has been passionate about improving Lexington's Internet speed and expanding access, said Lexington trails not only Louisville and Russellville, but Glasgow and other Kentucky cities. Cornett, an appraiser, said that some estimates show that it could cost as much as \$200 million to provide the fiber-optic infrastructure to make Lexington a "gigacity."

That might sound like a lot, but it really isn't, Cornett said.

"We were going to spend \$350 million on a new Rupp Arena," Cornett said. "This is the most important infrastructure investment we can make."

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