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## Some pay phones in Boston to offer free Wi-Fi Internet hotspots this summer

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 30, 2013 12:05 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

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Free Wi-Fi Internet access will soon be broadcast from 16 existing pay phones in Boston.

And officials from companies leading the effort hope to, pending city approval, rapidly expand the service so that a total of about 100 existing pay phones across Boston will offer free wireless Internet hotspots by the end of this summer. By the end of next summer, they hope they will have reached a total of about 400 payphones citywide.

The effort, called "FreeBostonWiFi," is being carried out on a trial basis, company officials said.

So far, the city's Department of Innovation and Technology has approved Wi-Fi installations at 16 pay phones, located around City Hall, Faneuil Hall, Downtown Crossing and Long Wharf, according to Tyler Kratz, president of DAS Communications, which is one of four private companies partnering on the effort.

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RCN Business Services, LCC International Inc., Pacific Telemanagement Services and DAS Communications announced their plan at a conference in Boston last week.

Four temporary demo sites were set up at pay phones near the Hyatt Regency hotel where the conference was held, the companies said.

One site at Cambridge and Court streets near City Hall Plaza was heavily used even though nothing was done at the site to advertise that the Wi-Fi signal was there.

“People had no idea it was there unless they saw it on their phone,” or other mobile device, said Kratz. “People were using it quite a bit. It blew my mind.”

Over about a 24-hour span last week, about 18,000 mobile devices “noticed” the Wi-Fi. About 2,000 devices connected and more than 200 people spent an average of 17 minutes using the Internet connection, he said.

“There’s a demand for this,” said Kratz.

He said the Wi-Fi service at that payphone by City Hall was supposed to be permanent. But, last week it was struck by some bad luck. A vehicle rammed into and damaged the booth. But, Kratz said the companies plan to have it replaced and restore Wi-Fi service within a couple of weeks.

The other 15 pay phones in line to get Internet hotspots are also located in downtown Boston and in areas that draw a high number of pedestrians, including commuters, business professionals and tourists.

Kratz said another focus will be to add the service to pay phones in low-income areas of Boston where some people cannot afford their own Internet access.

“Boston is a great city. With all of the college students and the young people it’s perfect demographically,” he said. “And we really want to make sure this is not just clustered in one spot.”

The Wi-Fi hotspots will offer around-the-clock Internet access for an unlimited amount of time at no cost to users or taxpayers.

The signal is usually accessible within 100 to 200 feet of the kiosk, though

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range can vary depending on whether there are objects or structures around the kiosk that could interfere with the signal.

To connect to the Wi-Fi hotspots, users need to select FreeBostonWiFiSSID on their mobile device and then accept the connection's terms and conditions. No password is needed and no personal information gathered.

The companies that own the kiosks and run the service pay for installing and maintaining the new infrastructure at the payphone stations.

Some of the kiosks themselves have advertisements on them to generate revenue for the companies, but Kratz said the Internet service will not display ads on users devices.

"The partnership is giving new life to telephone booths that have almost become extinct due to the evolution of the cell phone," said a statement from Jeff Carlson, vice president and general manager of RCN Boston. "Small cell and Wi-Fi technology deployed through this partnership is another step toward delivering high quality wireless by lighting up hotspots in Boston using RCN's unparalleled fiber network."

The payphone kiosks will broadcast Wi-Fi in part by using small cell technology, which allows mobile devices, such as cell phones, to work.

"It's interesting and a little ironic that capacity demands from the cellular market has allowed for the repurposing of existing phone infrastructure, like payphone kiosks," said a statement from E.J. von Schaumburg , vice president of Advanced Mobility Solutions at LCC International. "Utilizing small cell technology, we can take advantage of the excellent kiosk locations throughout an urban area and deliver high quality cellular capacity at the street level."

Last summer, a pilot program [launched](#) in New York City in which free public Wi-Fi Internet hotspots were emitted from routers installed at about 10 payphones.

Kratz said his company has been involved with the efforts in New York City and that his company now runs Wi-Fi from about 20 payphones there and plans to soon add the service to about 40 more payphones.

City officials in New York have said they plan to have Internet service added to

City officials in New York have said they plan to have Internet service added to all 12,000 payphones there.

Several weeks later after the program debuted in New York, two at-large City Councilors in Boston – Felix G. Arroyo and Ayanna Pressley – [proposed](#) doing something similar here.

Kratz said he has since met with Arroyo to discuss replicating the service in Boston and that he and other city officials have been instrumental in helping it launch.

Use of payphones has become rare because of cell phones. Some payphones no longer function to make calls. Others have been removed entirely.

Wi-Fi hotspots will help restore some use to the old payphone kiosks, officials have said.

The first-ever payphone was installed at a bank in Hartford in the late 1800s.

Since 1997, the number of payphones nationwide has dropped from an estimated peak of about 2.2 million to about 400,000, according to a petition that the American Public Communications Council, which advocates for payphone use, sent to the Federal Communications Commission last spring.

Kratz said the roughly 400 payphones in Boston his company hopes to bring Wi-Fi to are all owned by Pacific Telemanagement Services. He said there are few others in the city.

Kratz said his company is also in talks with city officials about the possibility of having free wireless Internet access broadcast from key municipal buildings, like police and fire stations, as well as from old-fashioned [fire alarm boxes around Boston](#). But, Kratz said, no agreement has been reached and other companies are pitching similar ideas to the city.

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