

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/07/BAGMNQSQ541.DTL>

Supes closer to approving citywide Wi-Fi

President says modifications to mayor's proposal could sway progressives to vote for it

Heather Knight, Chronicle Staff Writer

Saturday, July 7, 2007

Aaron Peskin, president of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, gave qualified support Friday to Mayor Gavin Newsom's proposal for free, citywide Internet access -- signaling the mayor's long-delayed initiative could finally be passed by the board with some modifications.

The Newsom administration proposed a free Wi-Fi system two years ago and has negotiated a contract with EarthLink to provide it. The company, which formed a partnership with Google to pursue the deal, would pay the city \$2 million over four years in exchange for building, owning and maintaining a network strung across city light poles.

Some progressive members of the board said that the contract isn't good enough for the city and that San Francisco should consider running its own Wi-Fi network.

Peskin said Friday that after studying the proposed contract and talking to experts, he has decided it would be a benefit to the city -- with some significant changes that are likely to make the plan more palatable to his colleagues. Peskin said he is in talks with officials at EarthLink about the proposed amendments.

"They seem willing to discuss these things," Peskin said. "With those modifications, this will be beneficial for the city and county of San Francisco."

Nathan Ballard, Newsom's press secretary, said he was glad that the plan may actually become reality.

"We are pleased that Supervisor Peskin is showing leadership and moving his colleagues on the board toward approving free Wi-Fi," he said. "It's an idea whose time has come."

Peskin is proposing speeding up the connection for those receiving Wi-Fi for free. Under Newsom's contract, those customers would be connected at a slower rate of 300 kilobits per second, while those paying about \$20 a month

would be connected at a faster rate of 1 megabit per second. Peskin said the speed of the free service should be 500 kilobits per second.

He also wants to ensure that the network is operational in all parts of the city, and that the requirement is enforceable. Some supervisors have questioned whether the contract -- praised by Newsom as "bridging the digital divide" between those who have Internet access and those who don't -- would provide decent service to the southeast sector, where a comparatively high percentage of San Franciscans lack Internet access.

Peskin said he wants to ensure the city is compensated for letting EarthLink affix antennas to its poles. He also wants the 16-year contract Newsom has negotiated to be shortened to eight years.

One small aspect of the Wi-Fi proposal will be before the full board on Tuesday. In April, the city's planning department said the Wi-Fi proposal is exempt from environmental review, a decision being appealed by a group called the San Francisco Neighborhood Antenna-Free Union.

On Wednesday, the board's budget committee will take up the proposal as a whole and consider Peskin's proposed amendments. It is almost certain to be approved by the panel because three of the committee's five members -- Peskin and Supervisors Bevan Dufty and Sean Elsbernd -- have said they will support it.

Passage is looking more likely at the full board, as well, which will take up the matter in late July or early August, Peskin said. It would need six votes to pass. In addition to Peskin, Dufty and Elsbernd, Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier has said she will support it.

Supervisor Gerardo Sandoval said Friday he is also likely to back it, meaning the mayor needs just one more supervisor to vote in favor of it. Several supervisors said Friday that they are wavering, but may wind up voting in favor of the contract with Peskin's amendments.

"It's definitely heading in the right direction," said Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi.

Supervisor Tom Ammiano said he didn't appreciate the mayor suggesting that supervisors' concerns about the deal his administration negotiated weren't valid. Newsom has accused supervisors who don't like his plan of playing politics, including in a speech in February to the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association when the mayor said, "I encourage the board to look beyond their personal opinions of the guy up here and talk about real people."

But Ammiano said he's open to hearing more about Peskin's amendments and discussing the matter further.

"That would be helpful," he said.

Newsom, who faces no serious challengers for re-election in November, has made free Wi-Fi a cornerstone of his campaign. Asked whether he worries about handing the mayor a victory as campaign season heats up, Peskin said the merits of the contract have to trump politics.

"I don't even see it in that lens," he said. "People run for office every several years, and that shouldn't stop the board or the government from moving forward. My job is to make sure it's a good thing for the city, and the contract is the best contract for the city."

E-mail Heather Knight at hknight@sfchronicle.com.