



Austin's Plan For a Public Broadband Network

In 1994 the City of Austin envisioned a communications infrastructure that looked ahead to the 21st century.

The internet was opening up for public use, telephone companies were introducing more digital-based services, and cable television companies were deploying new fiber-based networks with great potential for two-way, high-bandwidth communication.

Digital convergence was pointing the way toward a unified, universal communications infrastructure.

However, progress on commercial deployment was too slow. The massive investments and uncertain markets that companies faced made them hesitant. There was also a risk that they would keep their networks closed, keep competition low and prices high in order to recoup their investments quickly.

City policy makers recognized this, and issued a Request for Information for building a public broadband network. In the RFI, they set out their vision:

The City of Austin considers an advanced telecommunications infrastructure to be in the public interest, essential to this community's prosperity in the coming century and to its position as a center for high-technology enterprise.

...It is therefore necessary and appropriate for the City to take a leadership role to ensure that this infrastructure develops in Austin according to the City's goals and the community's needs.

...Working in partnership with private enterprises, the City can act ahead of market forces. [T]he combined strengths of the public and private sectors will assure a universal, open, first-class telecommunications infrastructure for the citizens of Austin well into the twenty-first century.

The RFI established several key goals for the proposed network:

- Universal Availability: Connections to the system will be available to every residence, business and institution in Austin.
- Open Platform: An "Open Platform" policy for the system will assure technical compatibility among network providers and equal access to the network for all service providers.
- Abundant Bandwidth: To be practical, the Open Platform must require that there always be available capacity beyond current demand, insuring that access won't be denied for capacity reasons.

Response to the RFI was encouraging, and led to a Request for Proposals (later known as the “Request for Strategic Partners”) to build a public broadband network as envisioned in the RFI and specified in the RFSP.

The City received several very credible proposals; however, at about that time, the Texas Legislature passed a comprehensive communications reform act that, among other things, prohibited municipalities from involvement in provision of telecommunications services.

The new legislation effectively removed the City’s intended role, and with it, the ability to shape the network according to stated public-interest goals.

Fifteen years later, the internet is mature, a variety of broadband facilities are available and in use, and Google’s proposed network offers a significant milestone in the advancement of a universal, open, high-bandwidth communications infrastructure.