Mayoral candidates sharply divided on broadband - Herald-Times (Bloomington, IN) - October 29, 2015

For the two men vying to be Bloomington's next mayor, the key question isn't whether the city could create and support a community-controlled, fiber-optic network that would give residents and businesses access to affordable and reliable Internet.

It's whether the city should do so at all.

And that question is one on which Democrat John Hamilton and Republican John Turnbull are sharply divided.

Hamilton argues that it's something the city must do.

"As a community, we don't want to be in a position where nearby communities have much better digital infrastructure than we do," Hamilton said. "For Bloomington not to be near the front of the line for access to that digital world would be a big mistake."

But that doesn't mean the city needs to take the lead on building that infrastructure and providing access, Turnbull said.

"Technology is really going to change. And that's not a business municipalities need to be in," Turnbull said. "Municipal government doesn't move fast enough."

The debate between the two candidates isn't a new one. It's has played out on the national stage over the past decade as municipalities have explored offering telecommunications services as a utility.

Cities and towns across the country have started offering Internet, often through a public electric utility and often at speeds of a gigabit per second or faster — a speed that allows a two-hour movie to load in eight seconds, compared with the national average speed that allows that same length of movie to load in about 22 minutes at 10 megabits per second.

Both candidates point to cities that have tried doing just that as evidence for their position.

Turnbull points to cities like Provo, Utah, a city of nearly 120,000 people that installed fiber-optic infrastructure in 2001, and Burlington, Vermont, a city of about 45,000 that did the same with Burlington Telecom.

Provo invested more than $39 million in infrastructure and garnered thousands of users, but it was unable to turn a profit and sold its entire infrastructure to Google in 2013 for just one dollar in a contract that allowed Google to sell the infrastructure back for one dollar if things went wrong.

And though Burlington Telecom now is back on its feet, earlier this decade, the public utility caused the city to have three credit rating downgrades in two years, and a former mayor's use of city

funds to pay back nearly $17 million in debt — despite a condition of its operating license prohibiting taxpayers from bearing financial risk for the service — was a factor in him not seeking re-election.

Hamilton, on the other hand, points to cities like Lafayette, Louisiana and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Lafayette, a city of 120,000 in southern Louisiana, now has what's considered a prime example of community-controlled broadband, though it wasn't easy to beat the competition and get to that point — in April 2010, in a statement before a U.S. Senate committee, Terry Huval, the city's utilities director, blasted telecommunications and cable companies for having made his life a living hell since 2004 with their attempts to block the city's plans.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, might be called the "Holy Grail" of municipal broadband. The Volunteer State's fourth-largest city has been called the vanguard of communities pushing for better Internet service, and its network service, "The Gig," often is held up as a model for the benefits of cities getting ahead of the curve.

The city's use of $111 million in federal stimulus funds six years ago has resulted in a tech boom for a city that rebuilt itself from the ground up, attracting both companies and economic investment, according to reports in the Guardian, the Washington Post and other publications.

The two mayoral candidates, though, disagree on where Bloomington would fall on the scale from Provo to Chattanooga.

Bloomington does already have some digital infrastructure in place.

From 1999 to 2005, the city invested more than $1.2 million building the initial ring of the Bloomington **Digital Underground** or BDU, a program that has two components: an ongoing goal of installing telecommunications conduit whenever the city engages in a construction project so that fiber optic cable easily can be installed later; and a constructed fiber-optic ring around the center of Bloomington connecting the city's main buildings, the Monroe County Community School Corporation administration building and several schools.

That ring is comprised of roughly eight miles of fiber-optic network, said Rick Dietz, the city's information and technology services director.

In total, Dietz said, the city has installed about 17 miles of conduit. That's separate from the infrastructure used by private companies like Comcast and AT&T, which install and manage their own service networks.

Utilizing the **digital underground** for a broadband of gigabit fiber service certainly is possible, he said — and a key element of the BDU story is that the city built the infrastructure "with additional capacity and conduits that could have a future use."

For that future use to be a community-controlled network, there are some key steps that would have to happen first, he said.

The first would be adding more conduit and fiber to cover the entire service area — likely the whole the city limits. Dietz didn't have an estimate for how much more fiber that would take or how much it would cost, since there are different methods for a potential expansion.

"The BDU could be kind of the kernel or the core of something larger, but the investment that we've already made wouldn't really get us to the finish line," Dietz said.

Dietz said the city also would have to change the policies of the BDU, which currently prohibit the city from offering fiber that's already "lit" with service.

Currently, the **digital underground** provides so-called dark fiber, unused lines that serve as the infrastructure, and each user is responsible for securing a network and bandwidth to "light up" the fiber. For example, a government entity like MCCSC or a private company could lease fiber from the city and then enable that fiber to carry digital information.

He also said the city council would have to approve any fees and that the city would have to create a utility service to maintain the infrastructure, manage the network and acquire bandwidth and other services for end users, the public. That would mean either creating a new Internet service provider or a managing entity that could contract with existing providers.

Those things are all possible, he said, though they require community buy-in and a willingness on the part of the city to put resources toward the project.

"There is a lot of potential here. A number of communities have moved forward with fiber initiatives and been successful," Dietz said. "But they do require significant resources to make them work."

Those resources are something Turnbull wouldn't be willing to put forward as mayor.

"I don't think that, for a community this size, it's practical," he said.

He pointed to the competitive, fast-paced nature of the telecommunications business, which he said is based on a model that doesn't fit municipal government.

That isn't to say that Turnbull doesn't support making sure people have access to high-speed Internet.

He's willing to get people in the room to discuss broadband and fiber that could provide Internet at speeds of a gigabit per second.

"But to sell it as municipal broadband is not genuine," he said.

Turnbull would prefer to see the market drive the service rather than getting the city involved in potential legal battles with existing providers and the potential of mountains of debt.

Hamilton said the problem with leaving it to the market to continue to drive the installation of

broadband fiber is that it wouldn't be done as fairly or a quickly as it should.

He said his plan — which would involve expanding the current fiber-optic network running beneath the city and either establishing a public utility, entering a public-private partnership or leveraging the city's rights of way to lease conduit to private companies — would ensure that the infrastructure would be a community asset and that the city could "figure out how best to build it and make it available to everybody."

"If the community controls the roads, then we can open them to everybody to use the digital infrastructure," Hamilton said.

And though Turnbull has criticized the idea of free broadband as unrealistic, Hamilton said the service wouldn't be free — just affordable.

Based on what other cities have done, there likely would be a tiered pricing system with gigabit speed available for less than $100 per month, he said.

In comparison, other residential services (when they're available at that speed) can cost up to three times as much — Comcast offers XI Gigabit Pro for $299.95 per month, and AT&T has launched U-verse with AT&T GigaPower for $120 per month in at least a few communities.

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