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MUNICIPAL BROADBAND NETWORKS TAKE INTERNATIONAL STAGE AT PHILLY EVENT

PHILADELPHIA - Municipal wireless broadband networks by definition would seem to be a local concern, but the Digital Cities Convention here today revealed an international interest in such systems - both as an economic development tool and as a source of business opportunities.

"The goals of the IT industry and the goals of people involved in economic development are totally aligned," Axel Leblois, executive director of CIFAL Atlanta, told conference attendees this afternoon. CIFAL Atlanta, a United Nations-affiliated organization, is an organizer of the Digital Cities event, along with the Wireless Internet Initiative and the U.N. Information and Communications Technologies Task Force.

Josu Ocariz, director of CIFAL Bilbao in Spain, said that an action plan on development of the information society will be developed at a summit in Bilbao this year, and then will be presented to the U.N. This is the first opportunity for cities to be represented before the U.N. in a summit, he said. He invited mayors to take an active role in development of the action plan.

Although this afternoon's panel did not include vocal criticism of municipal efforts to roll out wireless broadband systems - which some in the private sector have opposed as unfair competition or a poor use of public use - Dianah Neff, chief information officer for the city of Philadelphia, offered a defense of city efforts. She pointed out that the nine health clinics her city operates did not put hospitals and health care providers out of business.

She added that neighborhoods not currently served by high-speed data access will become new market opportunities for the private sector after Philadelphia rolls out its broadband system. The city's network is slated to be completed in the spring of 2006. Ms. Neff added that the system would require "back-haul" connections, Internet service providers, billing services, and other services that will provide market opportunities for the private sector.

She told the attendees that 15 states so far have enacted restrictive legislation against municipal broadband systems, and she advised them to be aware of what their own legislatures are doing.

James West, mayor of Spokane, Wash., said that despite being thought of as a fiscally conservative Republican, he could see the case for public broadband networks. He cited past government infrastructure efforts such as the railroad system, the Panama Canal, and the interstate highway system.

Kenneth R. Carter, counsel-business and economics in the FCC's Office for Strategic Planning & Policy Analysis, said that the more open a network is, the more it encourages people to develop applications "in a way the private sector might not." He added that cases in which municipalities must get permission from private entities before offering broadband services, "may be too restrictive" in a practical, rather than a constitutional or legal sense. Mr. Carter stressed that he was speaking only for himself and not the FCC. - Lynn Stanton, lstanton@tr.com

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