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Councillor Michael Thompson, Chair
Economic Development Committee
10th floor, West Tower, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto ON M5H 2N2

Dear Chair and Members,

Almost a decade ago, the City of Toronto partnered with Toronto Hydro to provide free wireless internet to the public in the downtown core. Unfortunately, this experiment faltered when it became a pay-for-use service hardly distinguishable from those services offered by for-profit corporations like Rogers and Bell.

Since then, we have fallen behind Canadian cities like Fredericton, New Brunswick, which offers free wi-fi coverage city-wide, and Edmonton, Alberta. An even greater concern for the City of Toronto should be the progress made by our closest competitors, including Chicago and New York City, where the municipal governments have used public-private partnerships to roll out extensive free wi-fi coverage.

I am writing to request that we re-visit this initiative and move quickly to provide free, reliable public wi-fi in our parks, the squares and plazas at our civic centres across the City including Nathan Phillips Square, and privately-owned public spaces (POPS). We should also work with our Business Improvement Area partners to facilitate wi-fi business districts.

Providing free public wi-fi in our parks and public spaces will signal to technology developers that Toronto is a tech-savvy jurisdiction and an excellent place to settle and do business. We already have a flourishing high-tech sector that has attracted the attention of tech giants like Google and Apple; we need to redouble our efforts to become an environment that supports the *next* Google.

In addition, free public wi-fi is an indispensable amenity for an increasing number of global tourists. International cellular data is expensive and inaccessible for most travellers who instead rely on infrequent and unreliable hotspots in some cafes and hotel lobbies. A city that provides free public wi-fi enables tourists to find their way off the beaten path to spend money in our neighbourhoods and get a more personal, authentic experience that will make them want to come back and visit again.

Finally, let's not overlook the direct quality-of-life benefits for residents of Toronto. Imagine being able to work seamlessly under a tree in Mel Lastman Square or overlooking a baseball game in Christie Pitts Park. Not every city is blessed with great parks and public spaces like Toronto; we should take every excuse to get out and enjoy them, even if we are on the clock at work.

It's time for Toronto not just to catch up with the opportunities of the twenty-first century, but to lead our peer cities in public wireless internet access.

Recommendation:

1. Request the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture to report back to the Economic Development Committee by March 2014 on actions City Council can take to provide free public wireless internet in Toronto's parks, civic squares, privately-owned public spaces, and interested Business Improvement Areas, with
 - a. a pilot implementation in Nathan Phillips Square by the end of 2014 and a continued rollout through 2015; and
 - b. adequate signage to ensure public awareness of the free wi-fi access in these spaces, taking into account the multicultural diversity of our residents and visitors.

Sincerely,

Josh Matlow
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