

City Council**Notice of Motion**

MM8.22	ACTION			Ward:All
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Making Toronto a Tech-Friendly City and Bridging the Digital Divide - by Councillor Josh Matlow, seconded by Councillor Mary-Margaret McMahon

** Notice of this Motion has been given.*

** This Motion is subject to referral to the Economic Development Committee. A two-thirds vote is required to waive referral.*

Recommendations

Councillor Josh Matlow, seconded by Councillor Mary-Margaret McMahon, recommends that:

1. City Council request the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture to report back to the Economic Development Committee by November 2015 on actions City Council can take to provide free public wireless internet in Toronto's parks, civic squares, Toronto Community Housing Corporation locations, privately-owned public accessible spaces (POPS), and interested Business Improvement Areas at no cost to the City of Toronto.

Summary

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 other Canadian cities like Quebec City and Fredericton, which offer free city-wide Wi-Fi coverage, and Vancouver, where coverage in community centres and other civic spaces was recently approved by council. An even greater concern for the City of Toronto should be the progress made by our closest competitors, including Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco, along with many cities around the world. These municipal governments have leveraged public-private partnerships to roll out extensive free Wi-Fi coverage- It is possible to achieve these goals without any cost to taxpayers.

I am writing to request that we re-visit this initiative and move quickly to provide free, reliable public Wi-Fi in our city's parks, the squares and plazas at our civic centres, including Nathan Phillips Square, TCHC buildings and privately-owned public spaces (POPS). We should also work with our Business Improvement Area partners to facilitate Wi-Fi business districts. The City already offers free WiFi at all public libraries, and the Toronto Transit Commission is set to roll out similar Wi-Fi coverage, but we can and must do better.

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 tech giants like Google, LinkedIn, and Apple; we have an opportunity to become a tech-friendly global centre.

Also, 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 have to rely on infrequent and unreliable hotspots in some cafés or 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, the internet has become the essence of global communications, an invaluable informational and educational tool that should be accessible to all Torontonians, irrespective of income. It is vital that we overcome the “digital divide” and break down the barriers to affordable internet service by providing free public Wi-Fi at all Toronto Community Housing Corporation locations.

It’s time for Toronto not just to catch up with the opportunities of the twenty-first century, but to become a more connected, inclusive City. It is time for Toronto to revisit its decade-old vision of being a leader in public wireless internet access and finally make that vision a reality.

Background Information (City Council)

Member Motion MM8.22