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What Happens to Riverside's Magic Wi-Fi System?

The future of Riverside, Calif.'s Wi-Fi network remains undecided after a contentious discussion during a Jan. 28 City Council meeting. Chief Innovation Officer Lea Deesing presented a summary of the network's history, which dates back to 2006, along with the costs of several options the city has going forward. Deesing recommended "winding down" the existing network and focusing new Wi-Fi efforts on more high-use areas. The City Council, however, had concerns about costs and possible lapses in service, while several residents shared concerns that their neighborhoods have no other way to access the Internet.

The one thing everyone agreed on was that the people want Internet access – the problem is finding a cost-effective solution that makes good on Riverside's promise to provide Internet to the people.

"As technology rapidly advances, we are now facing a difficult decision of what to do with the network," Deesing said during her presentation. The equipment that's needed to replace broken or damaged equipment in the network is no longer manufactured, and the city hasn't budgeted enough money for continued operation. Riverside's Wi-Fi network also does not technically reach broadband standards as download speeds are only 1 Mbps, while broadband specifies minimum speeds of 6 Mbps download and 1.5 Mbps upload.

Several city services also rely on the Wi-Fi network for video feeds, including eight police cameras, four cameras used by the Riverside Downtown Partnership, three public works cameras and one public utilities camera. The cost to continue using these cameras without the existing Wi-Fi network would be $25,000 one-time and $15,000 ongoing, Deesing said.

The camera issue is one of the cheapest and simplest problems to solve where the city's Wi-Fi is concerned, however. Riverside spends an estimated $718,000 per year to maintain the Wi-Fi network, but there's only $378,000 budgeted for this fiscal year, which means the city has a decision to make. Deesing presented several options, including: keeping the network as it is now; maintaining it in-house rather than paying a contractor; building a new network; discontinuing the network; or winding it down and refocusing on high-traffic areas. The last option was Deesing's recommendation.

Taking over in-house was not found to be more expensive the first two years, Deesing said, and overall was not found to be a cost-effective option. Keeping the network the same carries a high risk of incurring additional costs because the equipment is old, which is why she didn't recommended this option. Deesing also provided statistics showing that the network is used less than officials had expected, which makes continued financing difficult to justify.

Deesing provided statistics for 2013 that showed that 42,000 devices connected to the city's Wi-Fi network each month, accounting for about 147,000 logins. More than half of all users log in just once per month. A program offered through SmartRiverside gives students computers and a wireless card to access the free Wi-Fi network to help close the digital divide, but the city found that fewer than 5 percent of those devices actually connect to the network. "We were surprised by that," Deesing said.

A survey of about 6,500 student households by the Alvord Unified School District and Riverside Unified School District found that 4 percent of households used the city's network for home Internet use, while about 2 percent used it while away from home.

Building a new Wi-Fi network would cost the city about $6.5 million, not including software and maintenance costs, Deesing said. She also pointed to Seattle and Houston as examples of administrations that canceled Wi-Fi programs because they were too expensive.

Discontinuing Riverside's network would take six to nine months and cost about $175,000 if decided this year, Deesing said. If undertaken the following fiscal year, discontinuing the network would cost $200,000 to $250,000 because of electricity costs in the interim time.

Deesing pointed out that many businesses already provide free Wi-Fi to customers that overlaps with the city's network. She recommends winding down the network and refocusing city efforts on hot spots like the mall, convention center, city libraries, community centers and museums. This could eventually cost as much as $500,000, she said. Deesing recommended that the city begin winding down the network on July 1 in order to give everyone time to prepare for the change.

One concern raised by the City Council was a possible lapse in service if Riverside doesn't start building the new hot spots before the existing network is wound down. Deesing estimated that the cost to eliminate a lapse in service would be about $400,000 and did not recommend such a course.

One citizen who spoke after Deesing's presentation said he was "very disappointed" that service would be discontinued because in his neighborhood many young students wouldn't have access to the Internet in their homes if not for the city's Wi-Fi network.

Another citizen complained that the city is overly focused on the downtown area, while ignoring the neighborhoods and people who lack Internet access. "Riverside is a whole area! Not just a downtown speck and a few libraries," the woman said.

The motion was continued, meaning the decision has been delayed until an unspecified date.

BY GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY | FEBRUARY 5, 2014

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