Evanston, NU strive to get city online

By Susan Dodge, Suburban Reporter

Evanston could become the first “wired city” in the Chicago area through a computer system that would offer homework bulletin boards for kids, online public forums and access to library databases.

Northwestern University is helping Evanston negotiate the best system and price for “Technopolis Evanston,” which might be in place by 2000, said Brian Nielsen, learning technologies group manager for NU Information Technology.

The system would offer Evanston residents more interaction with schools and local government, Nielsen said.

“Parents would be able to find out what their children are learning in school and how they might be able to help them at home,” Nielsen said.

Residents could offer public comments about city council proposals and get other information online, he said.

“Having city council information on the Net and making it so members of the community could comment and read each other’s comments is a very doable thing, and it would help keep the city council accountable,” Nielsen said.

“As citizens of Evanston, we don’t want a commercial entity to determine what our information system is,” Nielsen said. “We want to do it ourselves.”

Instead of standing in long lines to register children for summer recreational programs, parents could enroll their kids online.

Nielsen said the service might be similar to a computer network at Northwestern, which offers students, faculty and staff access to course information, an encyclopedia, dictionary and reference databases.

Technopolis Evanston would offer more extensive service than Evanston’s existing Web page, Nielsen said.

It could be offered through Evanston’s existing cable franchise, MediaOne, or through a new technology called DSL, a digital subscriber line, Nielsen said. The service would be limited to the geographic boundaries of Evanston, and would offer cheaper and faster Internet access to residents than other Internet access providers, he said.

It is unclear how much, if anything, Evanston would spend to implement the program. Northwestern most likely would not pay to install the system, Nielsen said.

Similar wired cities are in Cambridge, England; Blacksburg, Va., and Palo Alto, Calif.

Technopolis Evanston would link Evanston’s schools, city hall, the public library, businesses and Northwestern University. Representatives from Evanston schools, Northwestern, the Chamber of Commerce and the city have been meeting for about nine months to discuss implementing the system.

All Evanston residents would have access to the system through computers at the public library.

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