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Technopolis Evanston OKs team selection for project

By Marilyn Claessens, Staff Writer

Technopolis Evanston, the public-private group formed to wire Evanston with high-speed Internet access and create a trend-setting cyber city with its own community network, has selected a telecommunications team to guide the transformation.

Enlarging the scope of the original plan for a high-speed fiber-optic wiring of all offices, homes and organizations, Technopolis will offer a combined trio of services: cable television, telephones and computers.

The proposed name of the entity that would provide the “bundled” service is Technopolis Evanston Enterprise Corp. The enterprise, which would employ 20 to 30 people, hopes to offer service during the first quarter of 2000.

Technopolis has stated it will use existing infrastructure whenever possible, make it changeable and affordable, and provide service and support.

The new Technopolis development team is led by the Performance Group, a technological and energy consulting division of the architectural firm of Loebl Schlossman & Hackl/Hague Richards.

Together as partners with the Performance Group are three telecommunications industry leaders.

They have a 90-day limit (with possible extension), to produce a business plan determining the project’s design, financial viability, and technological details.

The three partners are: Cisco Systems Inc., the manufacturer of about 85 percent of the switches used in transmitting information over the Internet; NEC-Business Network Solutions, which makes electronic equipment such as computers and modems and nodes; and Siemens Building Technologies-Landis Division, a firm that wires buildings to bring electronic communication to the desktop.

“We are one step closer to realizing the vision,” said Patricia Widmayer, Northwestern University special assistant to the vice president for Information Technology. She has led the two-year-old project with Ron Kysiak, executive director of Evanston Inventure.

Kysiak said the Technopolis Task Force of more than 20 civic leaders, educators, and business people chose the Performance Group instead of selecting service providers directly, to put Evanston in control of its own telecommunications future.
While the project hopes to provide a competitive advantage for Evanston businesses, Kysiak said, it also offers advantages to residents.

For instance, Kysiak said, if Technopolis chose a telephone company to provide high-speed Internet access, “we would only get what they provide and pay whatever rates they set.”

He said the task force decided that to control prices and content of telecommunications in Evanston, they needed to take the risk of the Performance Group not being able to turn its model into reality.

The Performance Group will pay its own way (estimated at $250,000), said Kysiak, to prove its concept for delivering bundled telecommunications services citywide.

As the developer, the Performance Group will obtain private financing, and it hopes to replicate test-case Evanston in other communities, Kysiak said.

Evanston is a demographic model, said Timothy R. King, director of the Performance Group, having the right size (more than 50,000 people), the right mix of community enterprises, a major university and two hospitals.

A public-private community corporation like the proposed Technopolis Evanston Enterprise would put Evanstonians “in the driver’s seat” as opposed to the passenger seat in a provider-driven vehicle.

The plan to bundle the delivery of telecommunications and operate it and set rates locally resembles the idea of cities municipalizing the delivery of electricity.

De-regulation has created opportunities for cities to take charge of their futures, King said. The idea is “evolutionary, not revolutionary.”

While he said Technopolis may seek to form partnerships with telecommunications providers, “We want to manage it and run it with our community involved. AT&T might be our partner with their lines, but with our electronics.”

Similarly, the repair truck that pulls up to a residence could belong to a cable company, “but we might determine what the cable company provides.”

King said the Performance Group will consult providers such as Evanston’s cable television supplier MediaOne, and AT&T, and Ameritech to determine how they might fit into the plan.

Technopolis Evanston Enterprise would bill customers for the bundled service, and fees will be lower if more people subscribe, according to the model.

The target fee, King said, is $60 to $70 a month for telephone, cable television and Internet access.

“We would be thrilled if we were able to identify 20 percent of the Evanston residential community subscribing this service ($60 to $70 monthly).”
But if 50 percent of residents subscribe, the cost could drop to $40 monthly or plunge as low as $20 if 80 percent subscribe. People may elect not to subscribe.

King said other research suggests that users should pay a fee only for service. Every time they click the mouse it would trigger a bill, possibly 5 cents per click.

In King’s rough estimate, between $30 to $50 million leaves the city each year for the services he believes Technopolis Evanston can provide more efficiently.

The speed in connecting to the Internet and to the community network, he said, will likely be based on the slowest speed possible on the fiber optic “four-lane highway” or backbone ringing the city.

That speed is about 155 megabits per second (Mbps). He said it is 100 times faster than a 56K modem, but that’s the slowest speed to be offered.

Technopolis Evanston will offer levels of service, and that’s why nodes called hubs or “tollgates to the highway” will be situated in the neighborhoods. “The fastest node could be 922 Mbps,” King said.

In a 90 percent residential area, King said, 155 Mbps might be more bandwidth than residents want, but they could select one gigabyte, still 10 times faster.

King expects four classes of residential users and individual residents in any neighborhood could tailor service to meet their needs.

In addition, residences with multiple computers could transmit information simultaneously, and “they could talk to each other.”

Northwestern University, which has its own 222-mile fiber-optic ring connecting campus buildings, has provided key technical assistance to Technopolis from its inception.

When the university installed its network several years ago, Professor Mort Rahimi, vice president for information technology, who served on the Research Park Board, suggested to Kysiak that the city do the same thing.

In the coming century, Rahimi said, more people will choose to work from their homes, making the decision to spend more time with their families.

“Perhaps the way we can develop business in Evanston is to use the attractions we already have for people who want to live here,” Rahimi said.

Mayor Lorraine H. Morton, an early supporter of the project, believes that the “erudite Evanston community” is ready to be wired.

“If there ever was anything suitable for this community, it is Technopolis. Our city is hoping to become a major information center.”