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Broadband is in the air as cities launch initiatives

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Broadband Internet access is as critical in the Digital Age as telephone lines were in the 20th century. It's heartening to see cities across the country taking the initiative to develop strategies for delivering wireless Internet service.

They are stepping into a breach left by the federal government. Lacking a national broadband policy, the United States has fallen from third to 16th place in world broadband rankings in just a few years. There is no substitute for a national policy, but individual cities at least may be able to stop America's distressing slide.

The latest to join the wireless race is San Francisco, which last week solicited proposals to blanket its 49 square miles with affordable wireless Internet access.

While this initiative claims the spotlight, many Bay Area cities already have ventured into wireless, and others are set to join the fray. The projects range from city-backed ventures in San Jose to private-sector installations in smaller cities. The most ambitious idea is from Joint Venture Silicon Valley, which would like to blanket most outdoor locations throughout the region with wireless access.

And help is close to home. Thursday, Intel announced it's working with 13 cities around the world, from Corpus Christi to Jerusalem, to deploy wireless Internet systems, and offered to help others. Projects range from free Internet access in limited areas to affordable access across entire cities, which can replace or supplement residents' DSL or cable modem connections.

The potential benefits of wireless access are as diverse as the cities that are exploring the idea. Widespread wireless broadband in a city or region can:

- Help bridge the digital divide by providing free or subsidized access to low-income residents.
- Deliver high-speed Internet access to areas where service is not provided by private companies.
- Bring more competition to a broadband market increasingly controlled by a duopoly of cable and telephone firms.
- Replace older communication networks used by police or firefighters and provide time-saving applications to other city workers. Imagine a building inspector accessing city codes from a neighborhood, or a surveyor downloading a map at a construction site.

- Be a tool of economic development. Widespread access could help San Jose attract conventions and business meetings. The city already has so-called "hot spots" around Cesar Chavez Plaza and in San Pedro Square, helping to draw visitors to area restaurants and shops. It soon hopes to add a third around the new City Hall.

Not that every city should throw millions of taxpayer dollars into WiFi. Cities can play any number of roles, from service provider to seed investor to mere catalyst for attracting private partners with innovative ideas. Any city contemplating a large WiFi project should think carefully about its needs, objectives and business model, as San Jose appears to be doing. The city may launch a broad initiative like San Francisco's, but it's studying various options.

Some municipal projects have required no public money. The WiFi "clouds" that blanket more than half of Cupertino and Santa Clara, for example, are entirely paid for by MetroFi, a private provider.

"There is not one-size-fits-all in terms of who owns the network and who pays for it," says Chuck Haas, MetroFi's CEO.

Cities that want to provide service at below-market rates might front some capital to help build a network, then outsource its operation. Others may simply recruit a private provider who can serve residents at low cost or even for free. AnchorFree runs a hot spot in downtown Palo Alto that brings in revenue through advertising.

Some critics have demonized municipal broadband projects as misguided efforts harkening back to socialism and interfering with the free market. But they miss the point. Municipal WiFi projects can energize the market for high-speed Internet services and ensure that all residents can access the resources of cyberspace, just as virtually everyone has access to a telephone.

Countries that are leading the global broadband race have national policies to make it happen. In the United States, without more leadership from Washington, individual cities may have to get creative to fill the gap and propel the nation forward.