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## A connected city

Madison takes steps to improve its digital infrastructure

BY **LIZ MERFELD** NOVEMBER 27, 2013 3:00 PM

**The city of Madison is recruiting applicants** for a new **Digital Technology Committee**, tasked with advising Mayor Paul Soglin and the Common Council on ways to make high-speed Internet more accessible to residents and businesses, with a focus on low-income areas.

Downtown Ald. Scott Resnick, who played a part in creating the committee, explains that when it comes to high-speed Internet, "We have certain voids in Madison." He's referring both to neighborhoods that lack the infrastructure needed to bring high-speed Internet to residents and to economic barriers that prevent so many people from connecting.

To help address infrastructure shortcomings, the committee plans to leverage the resources of the **Metropolitan Unified Fiber Network** (MUFN), a collaborative fiber-optic network composed of 16 Madison-area government, education, health

care and nonprofit organizations operating with federal stimulus funds.

Over the next few years, Madison will be wiring all its community centers, libraries and schools with high-speed Internet. "Contracts have been signed to do this," Resnick says. "However, not every location is yet wired. We also need the cooperation with service providers to provide the Internet services at an affordable cost."

Connecting these institutions to the network and contracting with local providers are two pieces of a larger puzzle. The committee will also be charged with exploring ways to get the Internet into more homes, and at a price within residents' reach.

"The Internet and computers play a critical role in leveling the playing field," particularly for students, Resnick stresses. A high-speed Internet connection at home translates to the ability to check grades, email teachers, get homework help and apply for college and jobs.

Resnick got a start on tackling this issue earlier this month when he took part in submitting a capital budget amendment of \$150,000 for an experimental expansion of the Internet to one low-income Madison neighborhood.

**In an effort to provide Internet access** not just to residents but also to travelers and commuters, committee members will also be asked to help find ways to bring free Internet service to city parks and other public spaces, as other cities have done.

Resnick offers Chattanooga, Tenn., as a **compelling example** of a city that has transformed itself technologically. "Look at how they've redefined their city," he says. Instead of waiting years for phone and cable companies to bring broadband Internet to various parts of the city, Chattanooga built its own fiber-optic network, making ultra-fast Internet available to residents at sharply reduced costs.

"How we structure Madison is going to be critical" to narrowing the achievement gap and to growing the economy, Resnick believes. He's hopeful that technology will be a major consideration going forward -- while cautioning that our goals and expectations should be realistic.

"We don't need to be wired like New York City," he allows, adding, "We are a university town, and we have some phenomenal advantages because of that. We should take advantage of them as a city."

Madison also benefits from an energetic tech community. Making sure that established and startup tech companies have the speed and bandwidth they need to innovate will be in the purview of the Digital Technology Committee.

Madison residents interested in joining the committee are encouraged to [submit an application](#), available on *cityofmadison.com*. Applicants should apply soon, advises mayoral assistant Sally Miley, as decisions will be made by the end of the year.

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