

Santa Clara becomes a free Wi-Fi city through power utility

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SANTA CLARA -- Silicon Valley Power didn't have to put the word out that there's a side benefit to switching to advanced power meters; anyone turning on a smart phone, laptop computer or tablet within city limits likely got the notice.

It's free and it's everywhere, although the best reception is outdoors and near one of the almost 600 transmitters installed throughout the city. Its calling card: "Wi-Fi network detected: SVPMeterConnectWifi."

"We are the first utility in the nation to offer free Wi-Fi as part of the smart meter rollout," said Larry Owens, a manager with Silicon Valley Power, Santa Clara's municipal power company. "It's been up less than a week and we're seeing 3,000 users a day."

Owens credits a failed Wi-Fi system that was installed in 2004 as being instrumental to getting the new network up. MetroFi was going bankrupt, he said, and the city bought its transmitters and experimented with the network in the interest of using it for meter reading. They learned that the system could perform multiple roles, serving both the utility and the public if a channel was set aside for unencrypted Wi-Fi.

"It validated that the technology could be used for the applications we were interested in," Owens said.

As the city moved toward the advanced power meters, new transmitters went in everywhere -- they can be spotted atop streetlights around town -- and Owens said it added very little cost to the million-dollar system to include the Wi-Fi element.

But it's not as fast as a home broadband connection, said Tom Mertens of SVP. Users can expect it to be fine for email or web browsing, but trying to stream music or movies would be frustratingly slow. And Mertens said it shouldn't be mistaken for a secured portal -- treat it like the networks found at coffee shops and other hot spots.

"You don't want to do your banking on it," Mertens said. "But for the basic stuff, it should work out pretty well."

Owens noted that many cities provide Wi-Fi access in a downtown area to draw people in -- earlier this month San Jose announced "Wickedly Fast Wi-Fi" downtown, which officials call the fastest of its kind in the country. And Google has had much of Mountain View covered since 2006.

But he said Santa Clara is groundbreaking in the way it came about due to the existence of a failed Wi-Fi venture and the existence of a municipal power utility -- components that resulted in the dual-purpose system.

"We are very excited about it," Owens said. "As far as service to the community, this is a real gem."

For more information, visit www.santaclarafreewifi.com.

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