

City builds open-access broadband network with Google Fiber as its first ISP

Enlarge / Illustration of fiber-optic cables.

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Google Fiber's wireline broadband is expanding to a new city for the first time in several years as part of a public-private partnership to build an open-access network that any ISP can use to offer service. The new network will be in West Des Moines, Iowa.

Google Fiber "paused" plans to expand to new cities in October 2016 amid lawsuits filed by incumbent ISPs and construction problems that eventually led to the Alphabet-owned ISP's complete exit from Louisville. But in West Des Moines, Google Fiber will rely on the city to build a network of fiber conduits.

"Municipalities like West Des Moines excel at building and maintaining infrastructure. At digging and laying pipes under the roads, restoring and preserving the sidewalks and green spaces, reducing traffic congestion, and lowering construction disruption," Google Fiber said in an announcement yesterday.

The West Des Moines government's announcement said that "once the City installs conduit in the public right of way,

broadband providers will pay a license fee to install their fiber in the City's conduit. Google Fiber will be the first tenant in the network." A conduit-license agreement "calls for Google Fiber to cover a portion of the construction cost to build conduit... through their monthly lease payments."

"On a monthly basis, Google Fiber would pay the city \$2.25 for each household that connects to the network," according to the Des Moines Register. Google Fiber would pay the city a minimum of \$4.5 million over 20 years.

Construction is expected to begin this fall and be completed in about two and a half years, the city said. While Google Fiber is slated to be the first tenant offering fiber service over the West Des Moines network, the city is hoping to spur broadband competition by letting other ISPs install their own fiber in the conduits.

Current ISPs in West Des Moines include CenturyLink and Mediacom.

City aims to cover all homes and businesses

Google Fiber's previous buildouts have only covered a portion of each city, based on where demand was highest. But West Des Moines is aiming for universal coverage, and Google Fiber said it will offer service "city-wide."

"Every home and business in West Des Moines is eligible for a free connection point from their property to the municipal fiber conduit," the city said. "The City will be installing these connections and will contact every business and resident in the near future to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate." The city also said it aims to make high-speed broadband available to "all residents, regardless of their means."

The city said it will pay for its portion of the building costs by issuing bonds instead of raising property taxes. "West Des Moines plans to invest nearly \$40 million" in the project, the Des Moines Register wrote, adding that city officials intend to "solicit bids for laying the underground conduit that would house the fiber-optic cables."

While Google Fiber largely gave up on its own fiber construction, it offers wireless home-Internet service in some cities through its Webpass subsidiary. Google Fiber's announcement said the ISP will continue to "explore partnerships" with other cities:

This isn't the first time Google Fiber has collaborated with a city to create a fiber optic network. In Huntsville, Alabama, we lease fiber from Huntsville Utilities to provide high speed internet service across that city.

Whether in Huntsville, in West Des Moines, or anywhere else, our goal is to work with communities to find the right model that brings world-class Internet to more people and businesses, and that increases competition. We will continue to explore partnerships with other forward-thinking cities, utilities, and enterprises. After all, there is still so much more to do to make internet service faster and more affordable and enable everyone to get the great Internet they deserve.

The list of cities where Google Fiber offers either wireline or wireless service is available here. Google Fiber reached out to Ars after this article published to note that "we're continuing to build out our networks in all of our existing Google Fiber cities. In West Des Moines, however, we're using a new model that allows the city and Google Fiber to focus on what we do best."

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