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Farmington applies for Google Internet access

By Steve Lynn The Daily Times

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FARMINGTON — The city of Farmington, seeking improved Internet services for residents and businesses, will ask Google to install high-speed broadband Internet throughout San Juan County.

Mayor Bill Standley said city staffers are taking steps to apply for Internet services offered by Google's "Think big with a gig." Google plans to test "ultra-high speed" broadband networks in a small number of trial locations nationwide, the company announced earlier this month.

"Farmington is very interested in that," Standley said at a City Council meeting Tuesday. "If we can get that benefit of Google providing that broadband to our households and our businesses within our community, that would be an economic boon."

Last year, Comcast completed a multimillion-dollar upgrade to regional cable infrastructure, resulting in residential and business Internet speeds between six and 16 megabits per second in Farmington, according to the company.

In comparison, Google is offering speeds of one gigabit per second, more than 100 times faster than what most Americans have access to, according to Google.

A megabit is approximately one one-thousandth of a gigabit.

Comcast hasn't reviewed how the program would

affect its Farmington business if Google selected the city.

"I don't have a good answer," said Chris Dunkeson, Comcast regional spokesman. "I think we'd have to look at all the options available."

For a "competitive price," Google will offer services to at least 50,000 people and as many as 500,000 "most likely in multiple communities" nationwide.

Standley appointed state House Minority Leader Tom Taylor, R-Farmington; T. Greg Merrion, of Merrion Oil & Gas; County Commissioner Jim Henderson and Jack Little, a retired insurance business owner, to lead efforts to build a coalition of local businesses and organizations to draw Google Internet service.

Residents throughout San Juan County, oil and gas companies, small businesses and the medical community would benefit from faster Internet, said Little, chairman of the task force. Google's network also could draw new industries and jobs to the area.

"You could visualize the network everywhere," Little said. "It would make Farmington and Bloomfield and Aztec and Shiprock closer together."

Little believes that the high-speed network would mean significant progress for the area.

"It's a world-beater if we can pull it off," he said. "We really are going to need all the support we'll get."

Google says its goal is to experiment with new ways to make Internet access better and faster for everyone. The company asked that communities interested in participating apply by March 26.

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The city quickly is working to develop an application, City Manager Rob Mayes said. Faster Internet would help isolated Farmington and surrounding areas communicate better.

"We're talking about, essentially, Google looking for pilot locations to launch millions of dollars of investment in communications infrastructure," Mayes said.

Neither the application nor the project, if Google chooses the community, would cost the city of Farmington, Mayes said.

City officials want to meet with local Internet service providers Brainstorm Internet and DigiNet Wireless Internet to discuss the application, said Rich Friedman, the city's information technology director. The city is planning to meet with other governments throughout San Juan County about the application.

"We're all so connected that it would really make more sense to move it to a larger scope," he said. "That would also include Shiprock and some of the other denser-populated locations on the reservation."

Google will review applications to determine whether communities qualify based on a number of factors, such as level of community support, weather, construction methods, local regulations and the availability of broadband already offered to users.

Google says it plans to consult with governments and visit communities before announcing decisions sometime this year.

Having its own electric utility could give

Farmington an advantage in attracting Google, Farmington Electric Utility System officials said. The Electric Utility serves much of the county and a portion of Rio Arriba County.

The Electric Utility already has fiber-optic line and poles linking electric stations and facilities that Google might use to set up its network, utility officials said. The utility also could supply Google information on underground utilities throughout the area.

Google is accepting applications from any type of municipality, including counties, military bases, reservations and others.

Google says faster Internet could drive innovation, similar to how the transition from dial-up to broadband connections allowed online video and other applications to emerge.

Bloomfield City Manager Keith Johnson said the city is interested in faster Internet.

"It would be a great benefit to the businesses in Bloomfield everybody would benefit," Johnson said.

Margaret McDaniel, director of San Juan Economic Development Service, said any network should build upon gains by local Internet providers.

"Any time you can improve and get higher-speed connectivity, it's going to improve for everyone," she said. "We just want to make sure that we try to partner in with our existing infrastructure that's already here."

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People who would like to nominate San Juan County for Google broadband Internet services can click "get involved" and then "nominate your community."

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