

Bringing high-speed Internet to Houston's East End

ADMIN - FEBRUARY 17, 2005

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Bringing High-speed Internet to Houston's East End

White, Alvarado, TFA Unveil Wireless Service for Low-income Residents

Houston Mayor Bill White and leaders from Rice University, the Houston Public Library and nonprofit Technology For All (TFA) today announced the rollout of TFA-Wireless, a social enterprise project of TFA that will provide free or discounted high-speed wireless Internet access to individuals, businesses and community organizations in Houston's Pecan Park neighborhood in the East End.

Residents of the neighborhood who have a Houston Public Library Power Card and who attend an orientation class at the library or at TFA's community technology center at Mission Milby Community Development Corporation, 2220 Broadway, will be eligible to receive free or reduced-rate Internet services from TFA-Wireless. TFA will also provide the Melcher Branch of the Houston Public Library with wireless high-speed Internet access for the use of its customers. In addition, the project will harness the citywide SimHouston program to provide free e-mail, desktop software and online services for TFA-Wireless users.

The TFA-Wireless network is based on a cutting-edge combination of off-the-shelf hardware and customized networking software developed during the past 18 months by faculty and students in Rice's electrical and computer engineering department.

White joined East End's City Council member and Mayor Pro Tem Carol Alvarado, Houston Public Library Interim Director Toni Lambert, Rice University President David Leebron and Technology For All President and CEO Will Reed in a press conference at Melcher Branch Library this morning to announce the new service.

"The City of Houston is pleased to join Technology For All in their efforts to provide Internet access to one of Houston's underserved communities," Mayor White said. "The program will provide additional services to library customers and encourage community members to increase usage of the services available at their neighborhood library."

TFA-Wireless serves a 1.6-square-mile area of the Pecan Park Super Neighborhood in Houston's East End bounded by I-45 South, the 610 South Loop, Highway 225, Lawndale Street and Griggs Road. The price of commercially available high-speed Internet service is beyond the means of most residents in the low-income neighborhood.

"I am very excited about the Technology For All project induction," Council Member Alvarado said. "My goal is for this project to stimulate educational empowerment and encourage all East End residents to utilize programs readily available to them at our public libraries. If successful, I believe the installation of wireless Internet access will expand to other Houston-area libraries and create a stepping stone for other technological advancements throughout District I."

TFA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is dedicated to empowering under-resourced communities through social enterprises using the tools of technology. TFA provides various services, including workforce training, recycling and redeployment of corporate technology assets, document-conversion services for the business community, online content for workforce training, and consulting and leadership in its work with over 300 community organizations operating community technology centers (CTCs) in Houston and 56 other U.S. cities. Since 1997, TFA-Houston has assisted Houston-area community-based organizations in creating and developing more than 190 CTCs serving low-income and under-resourced communities.

"Technology For All has been focused on expanding our services to the communities we serve," said TFA's Reed. "As a tool for community empowerment, TFA-Wireless will help TFA create educational and economic opportunities in the neighborhood that have not previously been available."

Reed got the idea for TFA-Wireless after reading a press report about the cutting-edge wireless networking research under way in the laboratory of Rice's Edward Knightly, associate professor in electrical and computer engineering and in computer science.

In most locales where wireless Internet access is available today, such as a coffee shop or an airport lounge, each wireless hub requires its own wired connection to the Internet. The cost of providing this wired "backhaul" for each wireless access point is usually several thousand dollars per month.

Using a new technology developed at Rice called "TAPs," or Transit Access Points, Knightly and Ph.D. student Joseph Camp were able to deploy a pilot network of 12 wireless transmitters that pass information among one another. Camp spent the past year deploying this "multi-hop" network, which is far cheaper to operate than conventional networks because it requires only one wireline connection to the Internet.

"One of the central tasks of a university is seeking answers to problems, and I'm very pleased that Rice is taking an active role in finding answers on closing the digital divide in Houston," said Rice's Leebron. "Rice is actively seeking a greater engagement throughout Houston, and the TFA-Wireless project is an inspiring example of the difference we can make when faculty and students get deeply involved in our community."

In building the network, Camp and Knightly quickly determined that the perfect site for the central network hub was the Melcher Branch Library, which sits squarely in the middle of the network footprint.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to bring wireless Internet access to the customers of the Melcher Branch Library," said Houston Public Library's Lambert. "This is only the second branch of the Houston Public Library to offer wireless Internet access. Combined with the use of laptops, the addition of wireless Internet allows us to extend public computer access beyond what the physical building could otherwise support. We will be able to offer more computers for use by more customers than ever before."

The Houston Public Library system serves the city's culturally diverse community by offering a broad range of free educational and recreational programs through a central library complex and 36 branch libraries. Among the many services offered, the library provides creative solutions to information needs and free access to computers and the Internet throughout the city.

For details about TFA-Wireless, see www.techforall.org/tfa_wireless.html.

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