

City switches on free WiFi in core area of city as part of one-year pilot project

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As part of a one-year pilot project, the City of Saskatoon is making public (free) WiFi available in an area that includes parts of the Pleasant Hill and Meadowgreen neighbourhoods. The network, named “YXEPublicWiFi”, was activated on February 16, 2023. Anyone inside the pilot area, which includes approximately 1,500 residents, may now connect using a WiFi-enabled device such as a laptop, tablet, or phone.

On Feb. 2, 2022 the City announced its intention [to explore free public WiFi through a pilot project](#). The intent is to assess how the provision of public (free) WiFi can improve the quality of life for residents previously unable or significantly constrained in their ability to access the Internet due to barriers such as cost.

“There is a growing recognition in countries around the world that the ability to access basic services and programs and participate in today’s digital world requires access to the internet,” says Drew Bell, the City’s Interim IT Director. “This pilot project will help us discover how the provision of free internet impacts people’s lives and help us decide if this initiative is worthy of further consideration, including expansion.”

The isolation imposed by COVID highlighted how the internet can sometimes be the only means of communicating or accessing things such as: legal and medical services, housing information, important safety information and public health orders, day-to-day transactions, and work and study opportunities.

The free WiFi is intended to cover the area between 19th St W and 21st St W and between Witney Ave S and Ave U S. This area was selected based on population data (including high percentage of youth, seniors, newcomers, Indigenous persons), the needs of area students, consultation with external organizations, and the proximity to City-owned infrastructure where the necessary equipment could be installed.

While the network has been tested extensively, the City notes that the WiFi's performance – much like any WiFi network – won't perform the same on all devices and in all locations. For example, the network signal will be stronger closer to the access points installed on the light poles in the pilot area. The age and performance of the personal device might also impact the WiFi's performance. As well, there are some unknowns about how the network will perform during the changing seasons – like how heavy foliage might impact the signal strength.

“While there are many jurisdictions across Canada, the U.S., and Europe that have implemented or are undertaking similar projects, this is actually a relatively new area of exploration for Saskatoon,” notes the City's Interim IT Director. “We're expecting to learn a lot through this pilot. We're optimistic that we'll see some great uptake and that we'll be impacting residents' lives in a very tangible and positive way.”

At the end of the one-year pilot, its success will be measured by assessing usage, quality of service, adoption, and feedback from residents. More information is available at saskatoon.ca/PublicWiFi.