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CALIFORNIA

Cerritos Joins the Wi-Fi Age

The entire city will have high-speed Internet access through wireless data transmitters.

By James S. Granelli
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The city of Cerritos is planning to become the biggest Wi-Fi hot spot in the nation.

The city inked a deal Monday with **Aiirnet Wireless** to install wireless data transmitters throughout its borders to give residents, businesses and city employees high-speed Internet access.

Wi-Fi, short for wireless fidelity, operates at speeds comparable to DSL and cable-modem service. It is popular in so-called hot spots — usually no wider than a 300-foot radius — such as hotel lobbies, coffeehouses, airport lounges and malls. Experts expect it to spread as new technology allows for wider service areas.

When Cerritos' Aiirnet service goes live in January, customers will have a seamless online connection throughout the city, whether from a desktop computer at home or a laptop in a city park.

"The community is excited about this," City Manager Arthur Gallucci said. "We've been getting complaints almost every week from people who want high-speed service and can't get it."

Until now, some of Cerritos' 50,000 residents have had only one choice for high-speed Internet access and the rest have had none.

Verizon Communications Inc., the local phone company, can't provide DSL service to the southern third of the city, and the cable service, recently sold to **Knology Broadband of California Inc.**, hasn't upgraded its wires to provide high-speed service, Gallucci said.

"It's not unusual to have pockets, or holes in coverage, in urban areas either because of aging cable systems or because phone companies' central offices aren't close enough to customers to provide reliable DSL service," said Stan Hirschman, chief executive of Aiirnet, which is based in Woodland Hills.

Aiirnet has identified about a dozen Southern California communities that fit that description, but Hirschman wouldn't disclose the names.

Turning an entire city into a Wi-Fi hot spot hasn't been done before, though some companies have gone

bankrupt trying, said David Chamberlain, a Michigan-based analyst for Probe Group, a research firm.

Aiirnet will deploy its shoe-box-sized radio transmitters for free on traffic light poles, ball park lighting structures and city-owned buildings throughout Cerritos, Gallucci said. The city will have to pay only for the Aiirnet accounts it wants for 60 building inspectors, code enforcement officers and others who work in the field and need access to the office computers.

Meta Group analyst Chris Kozup of San Francisco warned that interference from other Wi-Fi systems could present a major problem to Cerritos customers. Wi-Fi operates on an unlicensed area of the spectrum, and that inevitably leads to collisions. And it's only going to get worse as more wireless technologies and customers crowd into the market, he said.

But Aiirnet's chief technology officer, John Griebing, says the company's technology can reroute calls when a path is blocked by interference or for other reasons.

Both the company and the city tested Aiirnet's network over the last few months, looking specifically for interference and other problems.

"We have a very accurate picture of who's transmitting at what frequencies," Griebing said.

The contract makes Cerritos the largest customer for 9-month-old Aiirnet. Gallucci said doing business with a company that lacked a track record wasn't a problem.

"It's easy when you don't have the service and no one else is willing to provide it," he said.

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