

Testimony to the New York City Council's Technology in Government Committee

Dana Spiegel
Executive Director, NYCwireless
www.nycwireless.net
dana@nycwireless.net

Good morning. My name is Dana Spiegel and I am pleased to be here today to testify to the New York City Council's Technology in Government Committee on behalf of NYCwireless, a non-profit organization that advocates for and enables the growth of free, public wireless networks in New York City, for which I serve as Executive Director. NYCwireless is an all-volunteer organization with seven (7) board members, approximately sixty (60) active members, and hundreds of members around the area and country.

Over the past five years, NYCwireless has been active in the deployment of free, public wireless networks in over a dozen New York City parks and open spaces through partnerships with local parks organizations and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). We have worked with NYCHA licensed low-income housing developers to light up three (3) low-income housing developments in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. We have created community engagement programs that take advantage of parks-based and other wireless networks in Manhattan, such as our annual wireless arts festival, Spectropolis. I and other board members regularly speak at industry conferences and at New York area Universities and Colleges to educate and engage students in the creation and use of public wireless networks and the benefits they bring to New York City. The organization sits on the FCC Consumer Advisory Committee with a number of other national community organizations, and we are engaged both nationally and internationally with other Community Wireless groups.

I am here to speak briefly about two topics that I believe are directly related to the City Council's hearing on wireless Internet access in New York City parks: How NYCwireless has worked to directly bring free public Wi-Fi to those New York City parks that offer this amenity, and How the New York City Parks Department can help to bring this amenity to all parks.

Free Public Wi-Fi in New York City Parks

Free public internet access in parks begins with NYCwireless seeking local interest and support. We work with local organizations, such as BIDs—like the Alliance for Downtown New York—and “Friends of...” groups, that approach our organization seeking help. Once locations are identified, we assist with the design of the wireless equipment deployment plans and seeking funding to support their build-out. NYCwireless provides design, installation, and support for the networks that we build through infrastructure, volunteer help, and the extensive know-how that we have developed over the past five years.

The equipment that we use is open source and standards based, to ensure maximum compatibility with end-user equipment, including laptops, PDAs, and more recently wireless VOIP phones (this last technology is still in its infancy). As a result, we ensure that both industry standard and novel uses of our networks are unrestricted, allowing residents, students and artists to invent new technologies and uses for public wireless networks. Spectropolis, our annual Wireless Arts festival produced with the Downtown Alliance and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, brought thousands of residents and visitors to down-

town New York to experience new forms of art and better understand how free public hotspots can be used.

Our hotspots have generally been deployed outside of park grounds and public facilities, or in the case of Bryant Park, using facilities provided by the licensed private park operator. We generally mount our equipment atop or on local buildings with the support of our partner organizations, beaming the wireless signal into the park. This deployment strategy is sometimes ideal, since equipment can be installed quickly and there are sometimes no facilities within the park to support the mounting of equipment. Though we have attempted to involve the Parks Department in these deployments, our efforts often fall on deaf ears.

We can often deploy a hotspot for only a few thousand dollars, and in under two months, to service most or all of a park. Much of this time is spent designing the network, ordering equipment and DSL internet service, and gathering necessary agreements. Actual equipment installation can take 1-2 days.

Our two most recent projects highlight our expertise and affordability. A few weeks ago, working with Solar One, the City's first solar powered "Green Energy, Arts, and Education Center," we lit up Stuyvesant Cove Park at 23rd Street and the FDR. This hotspot, which we believe is the north-east's first solar powered public hotspot, provides free Wi-Fi to visitors and local residents from Solar One's learning center. The hotspot was deployed with the help of a class of students from Monroe College, who learned how to deploy a hotspot through our education initiative. The hotspot is powered by a small 4-inch square antenna attached to Solar One's building, and is barely visible from the park grounds. Solar One sponsored this hotspot in order to bring more people to their park, and provide information about their organization through its portal page. They intend to integrate it immediately into the events they hold in that area.

Within the next few weeks, NYCwireless will be deploying Brooklyn's first public hotspot in DUMBO. Working with the DUMBO BID and Two Trees Management, free internet will be available in Brooklyn Bridge Park. In addition to providing this amenity, the DUMBO BID expects to integrate the hotspot into all events that take place in the park. More than other parks-based hotspots, the Brooklyn Bridge park hotspot is an essential amenity for the numerous parents who are moving to that area, so they can bring their kids to the park and watch them while still being able to work remotely.

In addition to these two parks, NYCwireless has been working closely with the Friends of Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza to bring Wi-Fi to that park. The "Friends of" organization felt that having Parks Department involvement was critical, and submitted a response to the recent RFP. We were informed in the last week that our network was awarded the contract to install the hotspot in the plaza. The proposal fee was sponsored by the "Friends of..." organization, and included a \$1 franchise fee to be paid to the Parks Department.

New York City Parks Department

As previously mentioned, NYCwireless has occasionally attempted to involve the Parks Department in our efforts. Unfortunately, we have been altogether unsuccessful in attracting their attention, even though al-

most all NYC parks that provide free Wi-Fi are NYCwireless projects. We have found that it is far more effective to deploy our networks within privately operated parks like Bryant Park and Stuyvesant Cove Park, or work entirely outside of the aegis of the Parks Department, beaming the wireless signal into the park from outside.

When the Parks Department released its first RFP over 2 years ago, NYCwireless considered bidding on the project. After reviewing the requirements, we determined that as a non-profit organization, we would be unable to meet the RFP's onerous requirements and costs. We understand that there were only a few proposals submitted, and that in the time since the contract was awarded, only a small section of 1 park has been lit up. In the same time, NYCwireless has deployed a number of parks and public spaces, helped to educate residents and students across New York City about how to safely use public hotspots, and brought free Wi-Fi to 3 public housing buildings.

Though we were involved in a single park response to the current RFP, we determined that the terms of the current RFP nor the Parks Department's attitude towards providing this amenity were not changed sufficiently to enable NYCwireless to independently provide a suitable proposal. We believe that a comprehensive change in perspective is needed at the Parks Department if New York City is to see a significant growth in City supported public hotspots.

We would ask the Parks Department directly: If the original RFP has clearly failed to directly produce the expected flowering of free public hotspots, why was the second RFP not significantly changed, and why were proven stake-holders like NYCwireless not consulted to ensure that the RFP be envisioned and structured properly to garner more and better responses, and that any proposal have a greater chance for successful deployment?

We believe that free internet is an amenity and should be provided to all New Yorkers just as grass, trees, and benches are. The costs of such a widespread deployment would be easily offset by the cost savings and efficiencies afforded by a high-speed wireless network available in all parks. This wireless network could be used by the Parks Department to run sensors, provide the means to automate its workforce, speed up the operations of the Parks Department while on location, and provide necessary infrastructure to support additional means of commerce by private franchisees. Such a network would also provide a means to inform the public about all news and events related to the parks, and would return parks to their rightful place as central gathering places for local neighborhoods. A parks-based free Wi-Fi network would require proper investment and support by the City, and should empower local stake-holders, as NYCwireless has done in our projects.

The failure of the Parks Department to address any of these issues is saddening. The people that suffer the most are the residents and visitors of this great city. We hope that the City Council's involvement will help change the direction of the Parks Department's initiatives, and NYCwireless will continue to work to bring free public internet to all New Yorkers.