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SF's BART in Talks for Full Wi-Fi Rollout

Stephen Lawson, IDG News Service

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The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District, is negotiating with a startup for a Wi-Fi network that would provide fast Internet access to riders throughout its 104-mile (167 kilometers) regional rail system.

BART would not pay anything for the network, which would be paid for by rider subscriptions and advertising, according to Wi-Fi Rail, a company based near Sacramento that says it has four patents pending on its Wi-Fi technology for predetermined paths such as railways and roads.

Municipal wireless networks have had a hard time financially, but public transit offers a daily captive audience that is growing as gasoline prices rise. Wi-Fi Rail estimates that within three years, as many as 20 percent of BART's 180,000 regular riders will subscribe to the service, according to Michael Cromar, chief financial officer of Wi-Fi Rail.

Wi-Fi Rail has been testing the system for about a year on a stretch of track in downtown San Francisco as well as on an outdoor test track. More than 9,000 people have signed up to use the system and have signed on more than 42,000 times, Cromar said.

Now BART and the company are in negotiations on the terms of a full deployment, in phases, which would take as much as two years. On Thursday, BART staff presented an update at a meeting of the transit system's board of directors.

Unlike other, established Wi-Fi providers, Wi-Fi Rail was willing to build the network, for an estimated US\$20 million, at no cost to BART, the agency said. Like Sprint Nextel, which operates cellular base stations along a busy stretch of track in San Francisco, Wi-Fi Rail will have to offer wholesale capacity to other service providers to resell, said BART spokesman Linton Johnson.

The transit agency will use the wireless bandwidth to set up its in-car security cameras for live viewing, and it plans to also put screens in cars that give service information to riders, he said. BART would also receive a licensing fee from Wi-Fi Rail.

Riders will be able to use the service free with commercials that pop up every few minutes or buy a monthly subscription, Cromar said. The monthly fee would be competitive with other hot-spot services that are priced between about \$20 and \$30, according to Cromar. Daily and other types of subscriptions would also be offered. For that, subscribers would share between 15M bps (bits per second) and 22M bps -- both upstream and downstream -- with other riders in a car. Tests have shown no noticeable slowdown between one and eight riders on a car, he said earlier this year. In tests, the system worked on trains moving as fast as 65 miles per hour.

Riders will connect directly to a standard Cisco Systems access point on each car, which in turn will link up to the trackside network. Underground, that system will use deliberately unshielded coaxial cable, called "leaky coax," and outdoor sections of the track will be served using solar-powered parabolic antennas.

Neither side estimated how long negotiations for the full buildout would take. But once talks are concluded, the first phase of the network should be finished and paid commercial service launched in about four months, according to Cromar.

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