

Could Wi-Fi Draw Jobs to Mid-Michigan?

Tony Tagliavia

If you've got a laptop and a wireless card, you can surf the Internet for free in the heart of downtown East Lansing.

"Anything that you can do in the comfort of your home or office, checking Email, checking news," Aerialink's Tim Lebel explained Thursday.

It's all thanks to a so-called WiFi hotspot at the corner of Albert Avenue and M.A.C.

Construction's already under way on three additional WiFi hotspots in East Lansing. One at Albert Avenue and Abbott Road, another at Grand River Avenue and Bailey Street and the last one going in at Valley Court and Delta Street, behind Beaner's and Crunchy's.

The money comes from Cool Cities grants from the state of Michigan. And college students we talked to say they appreciate it.

"I go to the cafe and use the Internet if I don't want to be in my apartment," MSU student Mandy Ward said.

But is WiFi useful for anyone other than college students at coffee shops?

"It's going to draw not only companies that want to do business but more importantly, it's going to keep the workforce here. [Mid-Michigan's] going to be a cool place to work," Lebel says.

Lebel and Aerialink are working with some local governments to explore blanket wireless Internet coverage, perhaps throughout Ingham County.

The City of Lansing is exploring a pilot project that would provide blanket coverage downtown and spread through the city. Similar projects are planned across the country in larger cities like Philadelphia, Milwaukee and San Jose, California, and in other college towns like Madison, Wisconsin.

Still, East Lansing Mayor Sam Singh cautions not to over promise what WiFi will do for the region.

"There's not one solution to this," Singh says.

He says incentives for high-tech businesses combined with the technology itself is the solution to drawing more jobs and keeping well-educated students in the region.