

# City Neighborhoods

## Downtown WiFi surfing turns out to be easy, even if you're indoors

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By Corilyn Shropshire, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Finger-numbing, face-freezing cold isn't likely to send WiFi Pittsburgh's wireless Internet service into hibernation. Even though it's only guaranteed to work outdoors, the new WiFi service worked well at several indoor spots, the Post-Gazette found during a recent afternoon spent trying out the service. Of course, it did even better outdoors. So far, roughly 3,200 users have signed up to use the two hours free-of-charge wireless Internet network since its September launch by the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership. And despite autumn's heavy rains and colder temperatures, there are no signs of a slowdown, said Timothy Pisula, executive vice president at US Wireless Online, the Louisville, Ky.-based firm that built and operates the network.

Despite DSL-comparable Web connection speeds, the network wasn't built with the brawn to bust Internet signals through steel, glass and stone to allow for Web surfing indoors, in controlled temperatures. Yet the WiFi network beat expectations and exceeded its limitations at several Downtown and nearby spots -- including the Wintergarden at PPG Place, parts of the food court at Fifth Avenue Place, Macy's Arcade Bakery Cafe, the lobby of the U.S. Steel Tower, and the posh new restaurant Hyde Park Prime Steakhouse on the North Shore. The Wi-Fi network in some indoor spots was able to upload the Post-Gazette's Web site in a matter of seconds, comparable to outside locations.

That might mean a boost in cold weather revenue for US Wireless Online. While Wi-Fi Pittsburgh is free for two "anytime" hours, meaning users can log onto the network any number of times the same day as long as their total usage is two hours or less, US Wireless is working to lure advertisers and aiming to reel in more customers looking for higher speeds at a cost of \$7.99 a day, \$14.99 a month or \$119.99 a year.

To sign up for the free service, users need only a laptop equipped with a Wi-Fi transmitter or card. After clicking on the Internet icon, users will be asked to register their name and address and pick a user name and password. After two hours have passed, they will be prompted to enter their credit or debit card information to pay for additional usage.

Composed of 60 wireless "access points," or transmitters mounted on light poles around the Golden Triangle, Wi-Fi Pittsburgh was created to serve as a customer magnet for storefronts Downtown, said Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership Chief Executive Officer Mike Edwards. It was meant for outdoor use, so the fact it also works indoors in many places is a bonus, he said. Indeed, he takes joy in discovering spots where the Wi-Fi network works indoors, listing the City Council chambers and the many windows at Palomino's Restaurant among them. "It's like sunlight," Mr. Edwards said. "It leaks into buildings and when you can find it, it's a real gas." There was "a conscientious effort," when constructing it, Mr. Pisula added, to stretch the Wi-Fi networks' coverage to reach some busy indoor public venues such as the food court in PPG Place. And he hopes to soon extend its reach to include the Downtown subway system. While Wi-Fi all over Downtown would have been great, both Mr. Edwards and Mr. Pisula said it was too expensive and created competition for the existing indoor Wi-Fi networks that some Downtown businesses already are offering their customers.

Still, if Wi-Fi Pittsburgh's Internet portal is elusive indoors, there are plenty of other open wireless networks in any given spot in the area free for the taking -- or rather -- the surfing. It's not without risks. Public or "open" Wi-Fi networks are notoriously unsafe, experts say, which is merely the price paid for a free-for-all service that allows anyone with the right equipment to join the party.

"Any bad person" could set up a wireless broadband network to "sniff" or capture anyone's e-mail or other private data, Mr. Pisula said. But he noted that the Wi-Fi Pittsburgh network "is only unsecured from the laptop to the service access point."

Beyond that, any information transmitted on US Wireless Online's access point -- antennae on nearby light poles, typically 150 yards or so away -- to its "control center" -- a satellite antenna atop the Gulf Tower -- to its final destination is encrypted on the network, Mr. Pisula said. Concerns about hackers hasn't appeared to be a deterrent to the 100-plus users that have been using Wi-Fi Pittsburgh on a typical business day from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., the network's busiest hours. Despite inclement weather, use of the service continues to grow. Wi-Fi Pittsburgh's heaviest day yet was during a torrential downpour, Mr. Pisula said.

Mr. Pisula credits the network's steadily growing use to employers' increasingly strict Internet rules, putting the clamps on employees who in turn have logged on to the Golden Triangle's wireless service to partake in such virtual pleasures as fantasy football, gambling and online dating.

Wireless doesn't necessarily mean seamless. Mr. Pisula and his North Side-based staff of three have been working to smooth out at least one kink since September: Mac computer users are plagued with slower speeds.

Mr. Pisula said the company gets about 20 to 30 complaints a month, some of which come from people in high-rise buildings who weren't aware that the Wi-Fi network was configured only for use outdoors.

Fussy Internet connections are just one of the hurdles US Wireless hopes to overcome by the end of the year after its sale to Dallas-based telecommunications firm IEElement Corp. is finalized. The planned buyout, whose mid-November close has been pushed back to the first of December, will help US Wireless shore up its finances and expand its offering of wireless Internet and communications services to its mostly corporate clientele.

Another move in the works could have city dwellers in neighborhoods beyond Downtown and the North Shore logging onto Wi-Fi Pittsburgh. But Mr. Pisula declined to disclose the details. "We have a dialogue with the city that's ongoing," he said. "The Ravenstahl administration has to figure out what they want to do citywide."