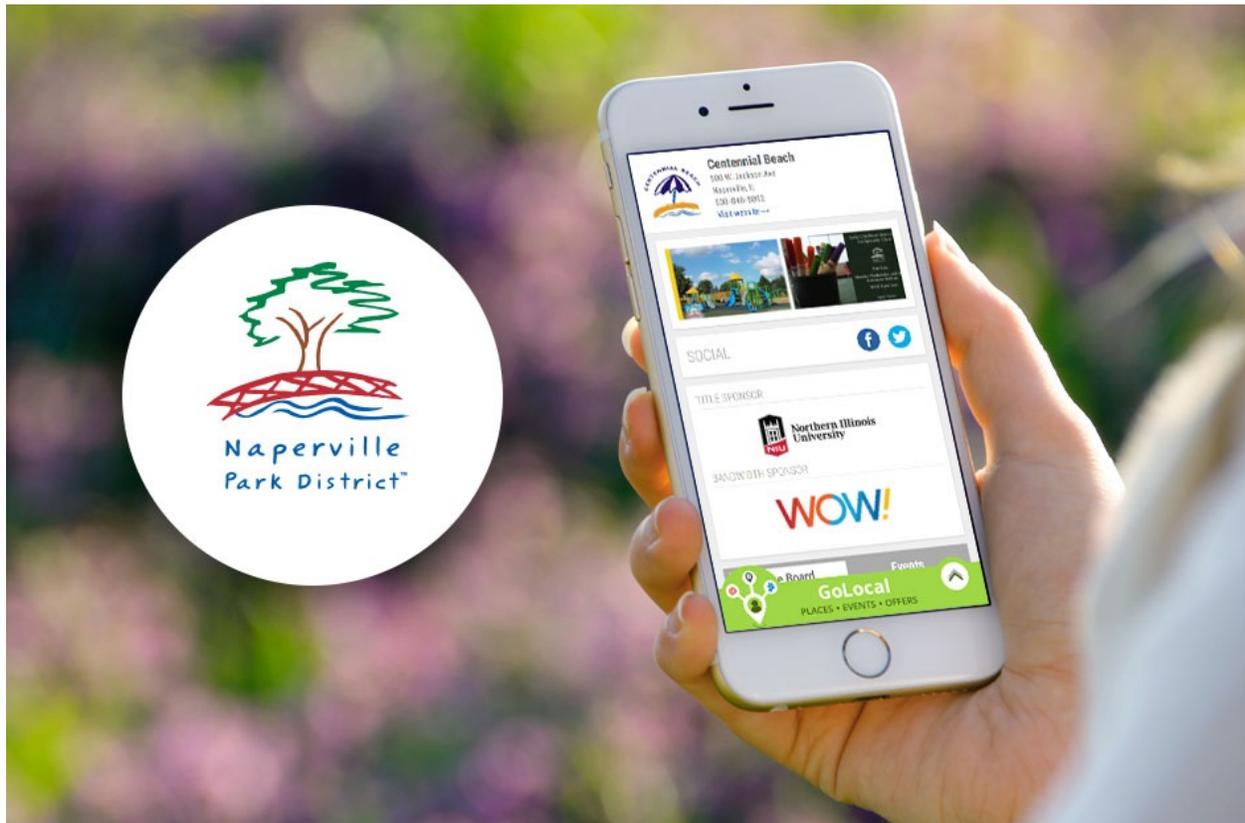# How an Illinois Park District Scored Free Wi-Fi for Its Facilities

Dawn Kawamoto | August 10, 2018

Faced with frequent requests for Wi-Fi at the Naperville, Ill., Park District's recreational and outdoor facilities, the district's board members asked Information Technology Director Omar Sandoval to explore the option for its largest attraction: Centennial Beach.

The estimated cost turned out to be $30,000 for equipment and $120,000 for Wi-Fi service over a five-year period to service approximately 4,000 devices during the three-month summer period in which the aquatic facility is heavily used, Sandoval told *Government Technology*.

He knew the potential price tags wouldn't fly with the board. But " free" would.

Sandoval called on one of the district's IT partners, WOW!, and explained his problem. The company, in turn, introduced the park agency to Digital Lobby, a provider of broadband equipment, installation, Internet service provider (ISP) services, advertising sales, support and maintenance, and analytics through its own operations or via resellers.

Through its partners WOW! and Digital Lobby, Naperville's park district was able to secure free broadband equipment, installation, Wi-Fi service and support — in exchange for providing Digital Lobby with free online advertising space for the company's national and local advertisers.

"Whenever you talk about Wi-Fi, everyone says it will be great to have but not much thought is given to the cost. It's nice to have and can do great things but not if you can't justify the return on investment over time," Sandoval said.

How it Works

The Naperville Park District signed a five-year contract, with an option to extend it to a total of 10 years, with Digital Lobby. The company will provide free Wi-Fi to the park district's Centennial Beach, Centennial Grill, Riverwalk Café, fitness facility Fort Hill Activity Center, Knoch Knolls Nature Center, Springbrook and Naperbrook golf courses, and outdoor movie and concert venue Rotary Hill.

In return, Digital Lobby will sell national and regional advertisers space on the Wi-Fi login page for each of Naperville's eight facilities. And it will also reach out to local businesses to advertise their events and offerings on the GoLocal page for each of the facilities. The Naperville park district also gets free advertising space on the GoLocal page for its own announcements.

Although a number of communities that offer free Wi-Fi service to the public may have operators that require users to share some of their personal information that they can monetize, Sandoval said the park district's agreement with Digital Lobby prevents the company from selling users' data to third-party marketing companies or other entities.

Other companies, such as Verizon, struck a deal last year with the city of Sacramento, Calif., to provide free Wi-Fi service to the public via cell towers on utility poles, but it will cost the city approximately $2 million over a potential 10-year lease agreement, according to a *Sacramento Bee* report.

Soft Costs

Although Naperville's equipment, Wi-Fi setup and service are free, Sandoval noted there are some costs.

Naperville had to bring in its own attorney to help it create Internet advertising policies, since it did not want to allow improper material, tobacco or alcohol ads on the site, Sandoval said, adding that the attorney also helped draft terms of use for those residents who log on to the district's public Wi-Fi.

He also purchased firewalls for the eight facilities, which cost a total of $7,889, he noted. This figure will likely rise, given Sandoval wants to expand Wi-Fi service to an additional eight facilities next year.

"I was initially cynical when it comes to Wi-Fi. It felt it went against our mission to get people outdoors," Sandoval said. "But when you see parents and siblings using it and see the potential to stream things like Johnny's first time at bat, it's really cool to see people using something that you worked hard to create."

Potential for Other Government Agencies to Land Free Wi-Fi, Generate Revenue

Kevin Niebergall, president of Digital Lobby, wants to expand the idea to other cities and counties across the country.

The company, which launched its service a year ago after two years of research and preparation, cites Naperville as its first official customer to receive free Wi-Fi sponsorship.

"We look for communities with attractive demographics, population size and something unique that will attract brands (advertisers)," Niebergall says, noting large events and festivals would fall under unique features. "We also look at deployment costs and installation costs too."

In the case of Naperville, for example, it has a population of over 147,000 residents and is a suburb of the greater Chicago area.

The company is also looking at the possibility of multi-jurisdiction setups in smaller communities.

Another potential path might be giving cities and counties a cut of the advertising revenue in situations where a municipality already has the equipment in place, Niebergall said. In other cases, once a contract expires and a renewal is signed, Digital Lobby may entertain sharing ad revenue because the Wi-Fi equipment and system are set up and advertisers are already in place.

"If we are making money hand-over-fist, would we share some of it? Yes, of course, we would," he said.

Customers like Naperville and others will not be responsible for paying any money back to Digital Lobby if the number of online users logging on to the sponsored Wi-Fi pages falls short of what the company promised its advertisers, Niebergall said.

"Digital Lobby needed to see how many potential visitors we would have and where most of the foot traffic would be coming from. That is how we came up with the eight facilities for the contract," Sandoval said.

http://www.govtech.com/biz/How-an-Illinois-Park-District-Scored-Free-Wi-Fi-for-Its-Facilities.html