

Citywide Fiber on Its Way to Salem, Mass.

August 6, 2018



(TNS) — SALEM — High-speed fiber optic internet is coming, but it might be slow to arrive.

The City Council recently signed a 30-year deal with SiFi Networks to install a "fiber to the home" network across Salem. Once built, the network will allow fiber-based internet service providers to sell their plans to Salem residents.

"We've been trying for years to woo in Verizon for Fios or other companies that can offer high-speed internet, and they haven't shown interest in doing that," said Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll. "We're excited about having another option and alternative for Salem residents. We're excited about the opportunity to take on other initiatives by having this high-speed fiber in our right-of-way, and we think having other options will keep our existing provider on their toes a little more."

But alternatives to cable-based internet service, like that already offered by Comcast, won't be available right away. The network will be installed by a process known as "micro-trenching," which involves digging a trench less than an inch wide along impacted areas. In this case, the impacted areas are Salem's paved roads.

The City Council approved the contract on July 19, which means SiFi can start its work. First, it must figure out where to begin, according to Matt Killen, chief information officer at City Hall. A permit will also be needed to dig into the ground.

"SiFi can begin, in a serious way, completing their due diligence with regard to market analysis," Killen said. "They're surveying the community in its level of interest in high-speed internet."

The demand is there. In a recent survey of residents, more than 80 percent said they want high-speed internet alternatives in the city, Killen said.

Even still, Killen doubted construction would begin before 2019.

SiFi has said they'd complete the build-out in two years. The contract requires they do it in three, Killen said, just for the sake of keeping them on a schedule.

Throughout construction, those living on streets where the fiber is installed will be able to sign up for internet packages as they become available. That means some neighborhoods will be using the technology before others.

By the second half of 2019, "folks will have several alternative high-speed internet options they'll be able to jump online with as their neighborhood's portion of the city comes online," Killen said.

The network is being installed at no cost to the city. SiFi will recoup costs by charging internet service providers to use the infrastructure.

The contract also gives the company one year of exclusivity in network construction, according to Ward 5 City Councilor Josh Turiel, who helped pull the deal together. During that year, no other provider can pitch installing networks in Salem — for example, Verizon if they had a change of heart.

"Realistically, this would restrict... say, Google Fiber," Turiel said. "If they wanted to locate here, they'd have to wait a year."

SiFi must also hit every building, which Turiel said was a response to some buildings in the city still not having high-speed internet access today.

It's not clear how the network might impact Salem Access Television, which gets money from fees charged on Comcast bills.

"If more people pull the plug on cable, you might see the amount of license fees collected for public access going down," Driscoll said. "Same thing with Dish Network, satellite."

But as fiber internet providers start hitting SiFi's lines, there could be a fix for that, according to Driscoll.

"Right now, we have SiFi providing the highway," she said. "There will need to be internet service providers to service individuals, and those are the times you work on agreements that have similar patterns."

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