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## River Walk gets Wi-Fi

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**L.A. Lorek**  
**Express-News Business Writer**

Strolling along the San Antonio River Walk, people carrying computers, iPhones or even hand-held gaming systems can now stay connected to the Internet via a free wireless network.

This week, San Antonio-based AT&T Inc. began making its wireless service available in partnership with the city. It's an unofficial launch during a testing period expected to last a few months.

"We wanted to put it in on time for Fiesta," said Ebrahim Keshavarz, AT&T's vice president of business development. "We're excited to have a network that wraps around the River Walk."

The city's Wi-Fi plans are not as grand as originally announced, and it doesn't have a current plan for citywide deployment. San Antonio follows an industry trend of cities scaling back municipal Wi-Fi projects.

In addition to San Antonio, AT&T is rolling out municipal Wi-Fi in St. Louis and Riverside, Calif., in pilot projects. The free service, with a minimum speed of 200 kbps, is available to anyone for 10 hours per month. It's supported through advertisements.

AT&T's more robust high-speed broadband Internet, with speeds of 1 Mbps, will cost \$7.99 for a day pass and \$15.99 for a weekly one. But it's available free to AT&T Wi-Fi premier customers, U-Verse and DSL subscribers.

"It's part of our strategy of making broadband available on a broader basis," Keshavarz said.

AT&T also announced in February a partnership with Starbucks to offer a mix of free and paid Wi-Fi service in the coffee retailer's stores nationwide. That service has started rolling out in San Antonio.

The San Antonio City Council originally approved the downtown wireless test project with AT&T last June. At that time, AT&T pledged to set up a municipal wireless network to serve much of downtown, including city offices and the River Walk.

In an e-mail Friday, April Borlinghaus, AT&T spokeswoman, wrote that the River Walk "has always been the primary focus of this pilot. Street-level coverage could always be considered in the future if customer demand or city needs dictate, but for now, we believe that the River Walk coverage area will provide an excellent service option for a wide range of both residents and visitors."

The two partners have spent the past 11 months designing the network and installing equipment. AT&T is paying for the wireless system but is not revealing the cost, Keshavarz said. It installed

32 wireless transmitters throughout the River Walk area to ensure ubiquitous Wi-Fi, he said. The city provided the system's poles and power.

AT&T is also making a separate Wi-Fi and 4.9 gigahertz public safety frequency available for city applications. The city does not have any planned applications for the River Walk area yet, said Richard Varn, the city's chief information officer. But future ideas include cameras; smart sensors to detect problems such as flooding or gunfire; and other wireless devices.

If the project is a success on the river, it could be expanded to other parts of the city, Varn said. But all of that is preliminary.

"Other cities have taken off and decided to build their own networks, but the city isn't interested in getting into the Wi-Fi business," Varn said. "We want to move in cautious and useful steps in seeing what role a city should play. We're just facilitating it without investing public dollars in the learning experience."

Covering a huge area with a brand new Wi-Fi infrastructure is something the market is still figuring out, Varn said.

Almost 400 cities across the country have announced Wi-Fi projects, according to Muniwireless.com, which tracks industry statistics. But some of the projects are on hold or still being studied further.

Other high-profile wireless projects, including Philadelphia and San Francisco, have run into trouble. Texas has 19 Wi-Fi projects, including San Antonio, Dallas, Houston and Corpus Christi.

With some of the wireless projects, the cities and companies figured out that the business model didn't work, said Ken Fellman, a board member of the National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisors. The weakening economy also dried up investor dollars.

"Everyone is taking a step back to try to figure out what" works best, Fellman said.

"Over the last two to three years, we've seen a lot of interest in and activity around municipal Wi-Fi," said Kelly Davis-Felner, senior marketing manager for Wi-Fi Alliance, an international trade group, based in Austin.

"What we've seen is some projects have not done well," Davis-Felner said. "Also there are a lot of projects that have done well. Minneapolis has a very, very good municipal Wi-Fi in place, and another is in St. Cloud, Fla.," near Walt Disney World.

Cities are also finding innovative uses for Wi-Fi, Davis-Felner said. In San Francisco, Cincinnati and Salt Lake City, commuters enjoy free Wi-Fi on public buses and Seattle provides it on ferries. New York plans to roll out Wi-Fi at its subway stations in the next six years.