

# Marshalltown uses wireless bootstraps to keep

*Mike Miller, Economic Development Board Chairman stands next to a wireless access point on the roof of The Max Building in downtown Marshalltown. Miller helped initiate the effort to provide hi-speed wireless Internet access for free in a 20-block area. (Photo courtesy of AP World Wide Photos)*



Cities across the country are in a constant struggle to keep their communities viable for economic development. The tale is no different in Marshalltown – a community bent on self-improvement and determined to set itself apart. It's the classic “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” story, but in Marshalltown's version the bootstraps are wireless.

## Getting Started

The story begins several years ago as the Marshalltown Economic Development Impact Committee (MEDIC) began to consider how to increase the number of jobs in the area. Funded 25 percent by the city, 25 percent by the county and 50 percent by donations from the private sector, MEDIC's purpose is to create and maintain jobs in Marshall County.

During MEDIC's strategic planning process, they established three goals: create a venture or angel capital funds for small business development, create a recreational lake in Marshall County by 2010, and bring broadband or high-speed internet access to the area by the end of 2006. MEDIC formed the Digital City initiative - a sub-committee tasked to make the wireless strategic goal a reality.

MEDIC chairperson Mike Miller worked on the Digital City initiative. “We were told that high-speed, low-cost broadband access is a bedrock economic development tool,” explained Miller. Miller should know, he also serves as vice-president of RACOM, a Marshalltown company that provides communication networks and services for the Midwest public safety market.

According to Miller, the Digital City group wanted to start with a “beta test” to see if broadband access made a difference in recruiting and maintaining jobs. After considering various types of broadband access possible, the group settled on a three month pilot program, which would create a wireless broadband access or WIFI zone in twenty-block area of downtown Marshalltown. The committee took one extra step to help set Marshalltown apart and draw attention to the project –

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# viable for economic development

by Heather Roberts  
Manager of Information Services

MEDIC would provide access to the WIFI zone for free.

City Administrator Dick Hierstein also served on the Digital City initiative. "A lot of pieces fell into place at the same time," Hierstein explained. "We chose WIFI because of its lower cost and faster implementation. We chose the downtown area because it had a wider variety of users."

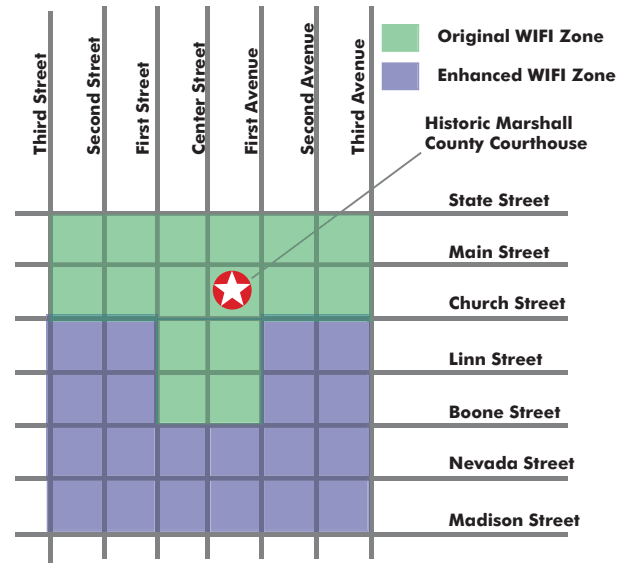
MEDIC provided thirty thousand dollars to put the WIFI equipment in place and it was able to use the internet connection at the centrally located county courthouse to feed the rest of the zone. The Marshalltown Works WIFI zone went live in June 2005, a first in Iowa. As the pilot project progressed, the Digital City initiative began looking at long-term viability of the program.

Miller described the pilot project very succinctly: "No cost, no features, no support, it's a bike with training wheels." However basic, the WIFI project did tell the telecommunications industry that Marshalltown was serious about improving broadband access to the area. "Turning on the WIFI hot spot really got some people's attention and got them interested in working with us," Hierstein reported.

## The Second Chapter

MEDIC was convinced private industry would get on board with their wireless initiative; they just needed to find the right partnership. "In Marshalltown, we've got companies to work with," said Councilmember Jeff Linton, one of the city's appointments to the MEDIC committee, "We can say this isn't working and ask them to bump it up a notch." By the end of the pilot project, Mediacom did step up, proposing an additional year-long pilot program to offer both a low-cost residential broadband product and an affordable business-class product, as well as expanded free WIFI zones.

The Marshalltown Works WIFI project also prepared the city well to answer questions when sitting down with industry representatives, "In one of our initial meetings with Mediacom, they asked us what we wanted," Hierstein said. "Through the



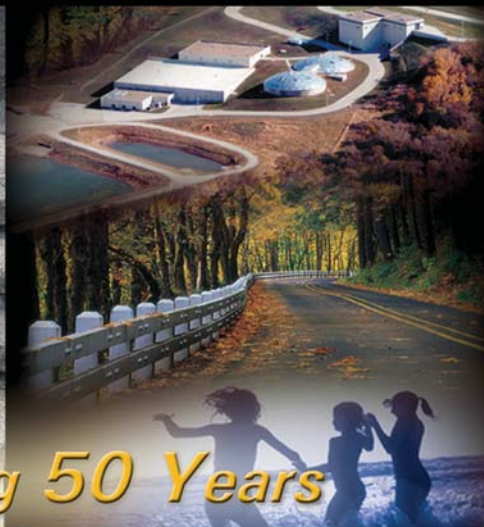
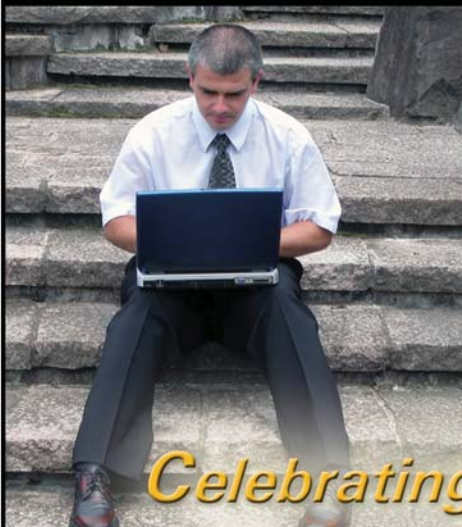
Downtown Marshalltown WIFI Zone

process, we saw there was a need to provide the broadest access possible."

Bill Peard, Senior Manager of Government Relations for Mediacom, said he has talked with several cities about similar projects, but Marshalltown was unique in their preparation. "Cities need to know what they're trying to accomplish, they need a direction," he said. "It is a partnership; it has to be beneficial for us and beneficial for them."

Hierstein is cautiously optimistic about Mediacom taking over the project. "There are risks with anything you do," he said, indicating he still sees room for improvement or change. He is especially concerned that the electronic technology changes too quickly for long-term agreements. "It just seemed make sense for us to go the WIFI route. It is just the one-year agreement [with Mediacom]. Neither one of us is obligated beyond that."

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