

Hydro's city network ranked top performer

Wi-Fi zone fastest wireless technology among 41 systems tested by consultants

TYLER HAMILTON
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An independent test of 41 wireless broadband networks across North America has ranked Toronto Hydro's downtown Wi-Fi zone the top performer.

The 14-city study, conducted by strategic consulting firm Novarum of Akron, Ohio, tested the speed, reliability and ease of use of a range of wireless broadband technologies, including Wi-Fi "mesh," cellular broadband data and third-generation digital mobile networks.

Toronto's One Zone network, which went live last September and now covers a six-square-kilometre area downtown, was found by far to be the fastest wireless network.

"The performance is amazing," said Phil Belanger, a managing director at Novarum. "The service we got on the street in Toronto was better than our home broadband. In the best places it was up to five megabits (per second) upstream and downstream, which is extremely unusual."

Novarum did not, however, test mobile wireless services offered by Rogers Wireless, Bell Mobility and Telus Mobility. Belanger said it would include such networks in its next round of tests, which occur twice a year.

David Dobbin, president of Toronto Hydro Telecom, said he was pleasantly surprised when he heard about the results. "We didn't even know they were up here testing it. It was a blind test," Dobbin said. "We're tickled pink. It's really gratifying."

Toronto Hydro's network was built by Siemens Canada using Wi-Fi equipment from Ottawa-based BelAir Networks. The results are sure to be touted tomorrow at the Wireless Cities Summit, a two-day event at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

While the One Zone ranked tops on performance, it came in seventh in the ease-of-use category, giving it an overall ranking of third place – behind first place St. Cloud, a suburb of Orlando, Fla., and second place Mountain View, Calif., where a Wi-Fi network has been built by Google Inc.

Since Sept. 7, Toronto Hydro has been offering access to its One Zone for free as part of a six-month trial. On March 7 it will begin charging \$29 a month, \$10 for 24-hour access, and \$5 hourly.

To satisfy police, users of the free trial have had to register with Toronto Hydro and receive a password via cellphone text message, a requirement that will stop once the company starts charging a fee.

Dobbin said One Zone's lower usability rating was because of that text-message requirement. "They really didn't like it."



BelAir's high performance wireless mesh technology is used for Toronto's Wi-Fi zone

One Zone has 230 access points, the highest density in North America, and currently provides blanket coverage from Front St. north to College St., and from Church St. west to Spadina Ave.

South of Queen St., the network stretches as far west as Bathurst St. and east to Parliament St. This makes it the largest Wi-Fi zone operating in Canada.

Dobbin said expansion across the rest of the city – possibly as far north as Steeles Ave. – depends on how successful the company is in signing up paying subscribers.

He said more than 30,000 access passwords have been issued since the trial was launched. The number of people on the network at any time has ranged from 270 to 900.

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