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Aligning Technology Solutions with Strategic Business Goals

Mesa begins reviewing bids for downtown Wi-Fi network

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Mesa staff members opened bids Friday for the city's proposed pilot wireless network, but Mesa residents are still months away from knowing which bidder will get the contract. Five companies from around the country submitted bids to the city's request for proposals, but it will take at least two more months before city workers have vetted each company and performed a technical and functional review, said Joan Baier, a purchasing administrator with the city's purchasing division.

The bids ultimately will go through a committee of employees with the City's Attorney's Office, the Auditor's Office, and the information and development services departments, Baier said. The committee will inspect each company's bid and come up with a short list of qualified candidates, she said. The two-month lag time between the bids being opened and the contract being awarded isn't unusual, Baier said. "Actually, it's pretty short," she said. "Some of them take three or four or five months, depending on how involved they are."

Mesa requested proposals for a pilot program to provide wireless Internet access in two square miles downtown. Subscriber fees would likely fund the program, as they do for most similar efforts around the state and the country. Many municipal wireless programs offer free access to city and educational sites and limited free access to users. Tempe allows free access to users in the downtown area, for instance, and Surprise will allow users free access to the Dysart Public Schools and city's Web sites. The projects typically are touted as free because the city provides the infrastructure to anchor the wireless network through light poles, streetlights and other city-owned property, while the company provides the labor and know-how. Users end up paying for the wireless service. All of the companies that submitted bids for Mesa's proposal, which the city has plans to expand, have experience with wireless Internet systems, though their experience varies.

Chandler-based Able Information Technologies has a long history working with the public sector in Arizona on telecommunications issues, but has done little in the way of constructing municipal wireless networks. Brandon Ames, Able's president and CEO, touted his company's extensive track record with Arizona's public agencies and Able's agreement with wireless industry leader SkyPilot among his 13-year-old company's assets.

The remaining bidders have experience in communities both larger and smaller than Mesa, and while EarthLink might have the biggest name, and contracts with the biggest metropolitan areas, the company has yet to get a system off the ground.