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EDITORIAL: 'Smart City': Leveraging empty broadcast space | Wilmington will test use of airways

Feb 27, 2010 (Star-News - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- Smile, Wilmington, you're on 'Candid Camera' -- 21st-century style.

The city is about to become the center of attention for technology watchers, as a test tube of sorts for ways to use the 'white space' that became available when broadcasting went all-digital a couple of years ago. Many here will recall that Wilmington was the first city to pull the plug on analog TV in late 2008, well ahead of last year's national conversion.

Now it will be part of the first experiment using 'white spaces' for such applications as Wi-Fi access, water quality monitoring, public safety, and possibly to expand broadband access to schools and underserved areas. The 'smart city' approach is an entrepreneurial effort, but local governments will be watching closely for possible uses.

One proposed use, for example, will be to place cameras near restrooms at Hugh MacRae Park because of periodic reports of trouble in that vicinity, while law-abiding park users will have access to a wireless connection as they enjoy the oasis near one of the city's busiest intersections. Proponents of putting the white spaces to work contend that by using broadcast frequencies, local governments could provide these services for less money because the infrastructure is already in place.

Wireless and broadband companies see great possibilities for using the abandoned channels. Google, Microsoft and other companies lobbied the Federal Communications Commission to open up the frequencies for other uses. The broadcasting industry isn't quite so enthusiastic, concerned about interference with broadcast signals and wireless mikes.

The Federal Communications Commission wants more information before opening up abandoned frequencies for use by governments and wireless users. This experiment could show the possibilities and also alert the FCC to any problems with plans to put the white spaces to use.

Meanwhile, we also may benefit from some of the technology brought in by TV Band Service of Wilmington and Spectrum Bridge of Florida. Its status as a small city with plenty of white space available and a good portion of the

population 'connected' via wireless networks made Wilmington an attractive place to begin. The companies may work within a 25-mile radius of the city, meaning a good chunk of the Cape Fear region may have a chance to see firsthand how this idea works.

It is far too early to tell whether these experiments will bear fruit, or how much their application may cost taxpayers, but it is exciting to think that Wilmington will play a central role in finding out.

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