

City councilman calls for hearing into Verizon broadband plans for Baltimore

By Gus G. Sentementes, *The Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 2010

A city councilman called on Wednesday for a public hearing next week to question why Verizon is not rolling out its next-generation, high-speed broadband Internet network in Baltimore, even as surrounding counties are getting it.

Councilman William H. Cole IV said he has been fielding complaints from residents who erroneously believe the city has blocked the move or made it difficult for Verizon to build the network, called FiOS, in Baltimore. He said he hopes Verizon will explain at the public hearing why it hasn't built the network, which vastly improves Internet download speeds, in Baltimore.

"To me it's about fairness; it's about equality and it's about offering the same thing that Verizon is offering to our neighbors to the north, south, east and west," Cole said.

Critics of Verizon and proponents of competition among broadband providers have complained that the city is being left behind in the nationwide push to improve high-speed Internet connections. A nonprofit advocacy group called Progressive Maryland, which joined Cole in announcing next week's hearing, recently began a bus billboard campaign to pressure Verizon into bringing FiOS to Baltimore.

Earlier this year, Verizon said it was halting new FiOS deployments nationwide so that it can focus on building out the areas where it has existing commitments. In Maryland, FiOS is in various stages of deployment in Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Harford, Howard, Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

Tabb Bishop, a regional vice president of government affairs for Verizon, said company officials plan to attend the hearing scheduled at 5 p.m. Wednesday at 5 p.m. at City Hall.

Bishop said Verizon laid out plans in 2004 to deliver FiOS to 18 million homes, and the company has reached about 15.5 million homes. He said the company still has franchise agreements with several municipalities that it has to focus on completing. Verizon has never said it would not bring FiOS to Baltimore, he noted.

Other cities where FiOS isn't being deployed include Boston, as well as Syracuse, Albany and Buffalo in New York, Verizon officials have said. "While we'd love to be everywhere at all times, we know we can't," Bishop said.