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Wireless mesh nets Moncton 'IT Hero' award

Technology Team installed downtown WiFi network in 3 days

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A team under Dan Babineau, the city's director of information systems, took three days last year to deploy a free WiFi network on downtown Moncton.

At the Information Technology Association of Canada Chair's dinner in Toronto, he accepted a Community IT Hero Award on behalf of the team.

The award recognizes an individual, group or not-for-profit organization that can demonstrate the creative application of information technology in improving the lives of Canadians. The telecommunications company Telus won the Corporate IT Hero Award for developing Upopolis, an online social network exclusively for children in hospital.

Babineau and his team installed the first outdoor wireless mesh network in Canada. Unlike traditional WiFi networks with individual access points hard-wired to the Internet, a mesh network wirelessly transmits data to a central Internet hub, making each access point part of the network's data-transmission infrastructure that passes data from other access points across the network to the hub and back.

Moncton hopes wireless Internet access would serve as a catalyst for a vibrant downtown. Cost and "scalability" favoured a mesh network. No new cable had to be laid, making the project more affordable. It can be scaled up to support more users or provide a wider reach by adding more access points.

In a wireless mesh, access points at each user's locale form the network. Each network user is also a provider, forwarding data to the next node. Each node need only transmit as far as the next node. Wireless mesh networking could allow people living in remote areas and small businesses operating in rural neighbourhoods to connect their networks together for affordable Internet connections.

Today, many people including a surprising number of tourists and business visitors use the Moncton network.

"It is with pleasure that I accept the ITAC IT Community Hero Award on behalf of the City of Moncton," said Babineau. "Thanks to the hard work of my team as well as our partners at Cisco and Hewlett-Packard, we were able to install a cost effective WiFi network that benefits Monctonians and its visitors. It's exciting to be part of a leading edge innovation and to see the benefits continue to unfold."

Upopolis allows children in hospital to learn about their illnesses and provides access to homework and teachers, and lets them stay connected with friends and family. The Kids' Health Links Foundation created Upopolis with development and technology services donated by Telus. Upopolis provides a personal profile, secure mail, instant chat, discussion boards, personal blogs and links to child-friendly games, as well as a homework site, kid-friendly health and wellness information, and connections to other children with the same condition.

Intel presents the ITAC IT Hero Awards. The ITAC and Industry Canada developed the awards program in 2001.

By naming winners in both corporate and community categories, the awards celebrate and recognize the achievements of people across Canada who used technology in innovative ways to help others. The award was launched as a feature of IT WEEK, a time to reflect on the successful impact of information technology on society.

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