

LIPA to test high-speed Internet service

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Few people were as jazzed as Tim Kelvas when word leaked in July that the Long Island Power Authority was considering offering an up-and-coming technology that allows for high-speed Internet service via electrical lines.

But Kelvas and most of LIPA's 1.1 million ratepayers will have to wait. LIPA has announced that on Feb. 21 it will ask companies to bid on a broadband-over-power lines and wireless Internet "demonstration" project to 105 homes and businesses in the Hauppauge/Commack area later this year. LIPA plans to test the Broadband Power Line system, which will allow Internet access via electrical lines and outlets, as well as wirelessly, over the next two years. Companies in the Hauppauge Industrial area will be a focus of the test, LIPA said Tuesday.

Kelvas, who lives in Centereach, was hoping for an alternative to his \$50-a-month cable Internet access. In July, LIPA suggested a test of 500 to 1,000 homes was possible.

"I'm a little disappointed, I really am," said Kelvas, an electrical engineer for North Atlantic Industries, a designer of electrical components for the military. " ... A lot of small utilities are already through their trials and onto rollout, and here we are one of the largest utilities in the country."

But LIPA chairman Richard Kessel urged patience. He said LIPA doesn't want to proceed with a wider rollout until it has fully tested the technology and makes certain it can offer it without interruption to its power services, or tax-exempt status.

"I don't think we should jump in without testing the marketplace," Kessel said. "Be patient. If things work out, we'll be everywhere with this."

Such systems send Internet signals over electric wires in a radio bandwidth that isn't used by electrical signals. Complications of the system, which in an Atlanta market costs \$25 a month, include possible interference with ham radio signals.

Users plug a small adapter into a power outlet and a cord into the networking plug of their computer. Power companies must augment their lines with signal boosters and other equipment between the Internet source and transformers.

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Kessel said the project, if rolled out profitably, has the potential to help offset soaring electric rates.

He said competitive considerations from the likes of Cablevision Systems Corp. and Verizon Communications Inc., the dominant local broadband providers, weren't a factor and could open the market to price competition. Still, he said, LIPA's entry could spur rivals.

"I think the fact that LIPA is looking into it will cause current providers to take a look at their pricing structure and find ways to lower them," he said.

"We're not looking to upset other providers like Cablevision and Verizon," he said, "but because we have a natural access into the home, there may be a unique advantage for us."

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