

Getting Connected

Free Wi-Fi for Lower Price Hill another step toward empowerment

BY NICK SWARTSELL · OCTOBER 1ST, 2014 · NEWS



Daniel Barnes, a junior at Oylar School in Lower Price Hill, says he sometimes had to leave the neighborhood and head to a public library if he wanted to get his homework done outside of school. But

the recent addition of five Wi-Fi hotspots around the area means he can stick around Lower Price Hill to do his chemistry work.

“Say we have to look up elements and their atomic numbers,” he says. “Well, with no Internet access, we’re not going to be able to do that. When we have Internet outside of the school, we can just do it right there in the moment. That’s a lot of time not being wasted. We’re able to get things done.”

The hotspots provide free Wi-Fi for the entirety of Lower Price Hill courtesy of a partnership between Symmes Township tech company Powernet and Cincinnati Public Schools. The project is the latest effort by groups inside and outside the neighborhood to help an often-forgotten pocket of the city, where boosters say the momentum is starting to empower residents of Lower Price Hill.

The neighborhood has the lowest rate of Internet access in the city. Less than 40 percent of households there, and perhaps as few as 20 percent of households, have fixed Internet access, according to a 2013 study by the Federal Communications Commission. The neighborhood is one of just 328 Census tracts out of Ohio’s nearly 3,000 where less than 40 percent of households have Internet access.

The so-called digital divide is a widespread problem. Across Cincinnati, more than a third of the city’s residents don’t have access to Internet. Statewide, Ohio ranks 35th in the country for access.

“In a world of increasing inequality, providing universal Internet access helps to create a more equal playing field, especially for our community’s youngest learners,” said Councilman P.G. Sittenfeld at a Sept. 22 ribbon cutting for the partnership at Oyler. “Imagine being a student today and trying to write a term paper without Internet access. Imagine being a parent trying to find a new job without Internet access. Imagine trying to be a citizen engaged in the world and not having email access. We can do better.”

Fifty-seven cities around the country, including Akron and Cleveland in Ohio, have some level of free Wi-Fi provided by the city to residents.

Oyler School, where the free Wi-Fi ribbon cutting took place, has been a hub for efforts to boost Lower Price Hill and break the neighborhood’s cycle of poverty.

It became a community learning center after a renovation in 2012, hosting students K-12 and housing a number of community services, neighborhood activities and after-school programs.

The change has been marked. In the 1990s, as many as 80 percent of the school’s students dropped out. Now, it boasts a 74 percent graduation rate, according to its Ohio Department of Education report card. Oyler has become a model for the community schools movement, attracting national media coverage.

But Lower Price Hill’s struggles extend beyond the school. The small neighborhood is nestled on a hillside west of downtown just above the industrial, nearly uninhabited Queensgate area. Lower Price Hill was originally built to house German immigrants working in nearby factories. Since then, it’s seen a number of demographic changes, including an influx of poor whites from Appalachia throughout the 20th century and a recent influx of Hispanic immigrants.

Like Price Hill as a whole, the enclave was already struggling when the recession and the housing crisis both hit it hard. Today it has about 1,200 residents, according to Census data, many of who live below the poverty line. The median household income in the neighborhood is just \$15,000 a year, half the city's median of about \$30,000.

Hard times have left many of the neighborhood's buildings vacant. A cruise along State Avenue, one of the neighborhood's main thoroughfares, reveals a number of boarded-up buildings and sagging structures. More than a quarter of Lower Price Hill's 452 residential units are empty.

But there are also signs of life on the street. BLOChhead Pizza, on the corner of State Ave. and Staebler Street, serves as the host of the neighborhood's first free Wi-Fi hotspot. The restaurant is owned by BLOC Ministries, a nonprofit that runs a number of programs and resources around Price Hill. Six months ago, the building housing BLOChhead Pizza was vacant and boarded. Now it employs 11 residents of Lower Price Hill.

BLOC works to help residents of Price Hill through a kitchen for the homeless, a coffee shop in East Price Hill, and a forthcoming print shop and T-shirt studio just down the street from Oyler. The free Wi-Fi partnership is a big boost to BLOC Ministries' mission of empowering Price Hill residents, director Dwight Young says. He says the next step is getting residents computers and other technology. Even those who have cellphones, he says, often have limited access to data plans that allow Internet use.

Savannah Thompson, a junior at Oyler, agrees that tech is a hurdle for those in Lower Price Hill.

"Not a lot of kids around here have any technology in their lives —not even a cellphone," she says.

Powernet has also provided a mobile computer lab to Oyler with 50 tablets for students. In addition, it's set up a matching program where consumers can purchase a tablet worth \$150 or more from the company and it will provide an identical model to Oyler or other Price Hill-based social service agencies.

Both Powernet and Councilman Sittenfeld say they're looking at ways to expand the free Wi-Fi program to other neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, community leaders like Young say things like universal Wi-Fi in Lower Price Hill have slowly helped the community find hope.

"This is kind of a forgotten island," Young says of Lower Price Hill. "But now we're starting to get a little bit of momentum ... whether it's the school's doing something or free Wi-Fi. Sooner or later those start to outweigh the negative things. That's what I see coming — a spirit of 'Yes, we can do this.' "©