

# Competition for Comcast, CenturyLink? Broadband expert discusses municipal Internet idea for Seattle



Chris Mitchell speaks at City Hall on Wednesday evening.

Seattle Mayor Ed Murray thinks that his citizens **deserve faster and cheaper Internet**. His constituents probably wouldn't mind having more choices other than the incumbents like Comcast and CenturyLink.

But Seattle may never see better, more affordable connection speeds unless some serious changes happen.

That was the message from Chris Mitchell, the Director of the **Community Broadband Networks Initiative**, who spoke on Wednesday evening at City Hall to a group of 50 that came to hear how Seattle could offer more Internet options — including a publicly-funded municipal broadband service, similar to what's already available in Washington cities like **Tacoma** and **Mount Vernon**.

Let's quickly recap where Seattle stands today. Mayor Murray has laid out a **three-pronged strategy** to “increase the availability of competitive, affordable gigabit broadband internet access,” which include reducing regulatory barriers, exploring a public/private partnership, and analyzing a municipal broadband option.

The City Council **moved forward with that first initiative last month** when it unanimously



[last month](#) [with a unanimous](#)

approved [legislation](#) removing “excessive administrative requirements” for telecom companies that want to build broadband utility boxes in neighborhoods.



Chris Mitchell.

In regard to the second initiative, the City tried to partner with a private company last year after Cincinnati-based Gigabit Squared said it would bring gigabit Internet to thousands of Seattle residents. But that grand vision crumbled after Gigabit failed to raise enough money [to implement](#) a high-speed Internet network in 14 Seattle neighborhoods using the city’s dormant “dark fiber” network. Gigabit, which is now being [sued by the City of Seattle for an unpaid bill](#), said it would offer 1 Gbps for [\\$80 per month](#).

Mitchell, who was invited by the City of Seattle’s Citizens’ Telecommunications and Technology Advisory Board, discussed how feasible that third option would be: To build and maintain a city-owned municipal network that [would cost north of \\$500 million](#).

Despite that high cost, it’s an idea that both Murray and former mayor Mike McGinn seem to support.

“If this doesn’t work out I believe the next step is for Seattle to build a fiber utility,” McGinn [told GeekWire](#) last year, referring to the Gigabit plan. “If I were in office that would have been my next step — to try and build political support for building a fiber utility if the private sector won’t do it.”

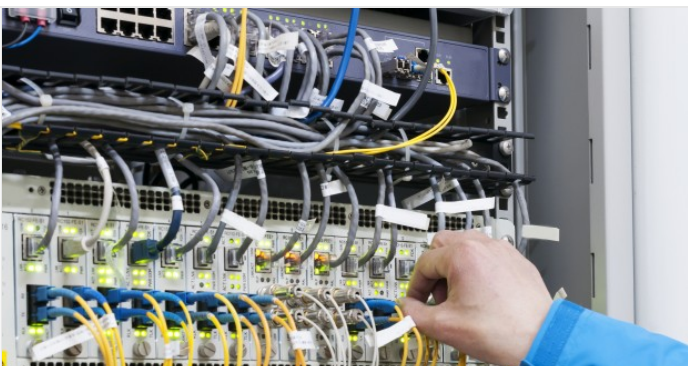




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Mitchell offered [examples of other cities](#) who have been successful with the idea of offering Internet as a public utility — namely Chattanooga, Tenn., Bristol, Virginia, and Lafayette, Louisiana.

“They’ve built what I think is the nation’s best Internet network,” Mitchell said of [Chattanooga](#). “They’re beating the pants off of Comcast.”

Other cities have had less success, namely due to the difficulty of building and operating a municipal network, and because of the existing competition from giants like Comcast and CenturyLink — companies that Mitchell says offer less-than-stellar service for excessive prices.

“CenturyLink and Comcast very much want to serve Seattle, but by investing the least amount possible,” he said. “We should be mad at them.”

Mitchell said that having a municipal option in Seattle would force Comcast and CenturyLink to drop their prices, which would “make it hard for the City to pay off their investment.” But in order for that to happen, he said Seattle needs a champion and/or group who can help demonstrate the importance of a municipal broadband network. Mitchell noted that there will be pressure on elected officials not to take any action with the amount of risk involved for a municipal broadband project, or only take steps to benefit the incumbents.

“Seattle residents and businesses need to demonstrate to elected officials that there is considerable support for taking action,” he said.

For now, the City is spending the next six months studying the cost and implications of a publicly-funded Internet system. It is also in discussions with other private companies who are interested in partnering with the City and using its dark fiber.

We asked Mitchell about what a municipal Internet offering would mean in terms of

attracting more startups and entrepreneurs to Seattle.

“It’s hard to be a tech hub if you have the same crap that every city across the country has from Comcast and CenturyLink,” he noted.

Michael Mattmiller, Seattle’s chief technology officer, also noted the importance of better Internet options for the region’s fast-growing companies.

“I go back to the idea that Seattle is going to add 100,000 people over the next 10 years, and 75 percent of that growth will be driven by the tech industry,” Mattmiller told us after Mitchell’s talk. “We need startups to come to Seattle, and we need them to be able to succeed with high-bandwidth intensive applications. We need to make sure we can support them with the bandwidth they need.”