

Headline: Wi-Fi available in parts of Hammond  
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Media Contact: LEMOINE, DEBRA  
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HAMMOND People with laptops and wireless Internet devices can now access the Internet for free in certain spots around the city.

The hotspots are concentrated in downtown Hammond, the **Hammond Square** shopping center area and Southeastern Louisiana University's campus as well as along the corridors of University Avenue, North Oak Street and Southwest Railroad Avenue.

The idea behind the free wireless is for tourism purposes, said William Joubert, director of SLU's small business development center. The free hotspots can be advertised to travelers who can then access their laptops, iPods and other devices while getting gas or taking a rest break, he said.

Organizers began working on how to develop the hotspots shortly before Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, but the committee formed to do it lost traction after the storm, said William Joubert, director of SLU's small business development center.

How to pay for the hardware and operation of such a system was the main issue, he said.

The committee didn't know how to get all the pieces together, Joubert said.

Then, people decided to make another attempt at it, he said.

The Hammond Chamber of Commerce, Hammond Downtown Development District, Tangipahoa Parish Tourism Commission, Hammond and SLU committed \$2,000 each for three years for a total of \$30,000, Joubert said.

Ron Taylor, who owns RAM Computer Services in Hammond and is a member of the chamber's business and commerce committee, found good but inexpensive equipment to use that lowered the cost of the entire project.

Hunt Brothers of Louisiana has installed the 10 digital subscriber lines (DSL) in coffee shops, light poles, businesses and government buildings, such as the Downtown Development District office, city hall, SLU and the Tangipahoa Parish Convention and Visitors Bureau around the city, Taylor said.

The connection isn't meant to compete with local businesses who offer Internet access, so the speed is limited, Joubert said. The system also drops users after being online for four hours, Taylor said. So far, the wireless system has about 150 to 200 users per day, he said.

When people access the site, they come to a screen showing the sponsors of the site and are asked to accept the user agreement, Taylor said.

Advertisements for upcoming events, such as Hot August Nights and Blues and Barbeque, two Downtown Development District events, are also listed on the entrance screen, Joubert said.

Users are then asked to enter their ZIP code, so that the organizers of the site have an idea of who is accessing the site for marketing purposes, Taylor said.

Attempts to market the site have only just begun, Joubert said. SLU marketing students have come up with logos and plans to advertise the site, he said.

Billboards along interstates 12 and 55 have been discussed as well, Joubert said.

ON THE INTERNET: <http://www.hammondfreewireless.com>

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