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## Sprint, Intel, Motorola to test Wi-Max broadband system

**By Jon Van**

Tribune staff reporter  
Published July 2, 2005

Sprint Corp. will work with Intel, Motorola and other vendors to test new wireless technology that could lead to an alternative broadband service.

Sprint, which offered a wireless broadband service in Chicago four years ago that still serves some customers here, is one of many carriers taking a hard look at a technology called Wi-Max that promises to greatly expand customer choices for high-speed Internet service.

Wi-Max is an open standard for wireless service similar to Wi-Fi, which has proven quite popular. But Wi-Fi's wireless reach is measured in hundreds of feet while Wi-Max signals extend over many miles.

In light of this week's Supreme Court decision that affirmed that cable TV operators do not need to share their broadband networks with competitors, there is heightened interest in wireless broadband among carriers.

The court decision suggests that cable and telephone operators that each have wires going into residences will enjoy a duopoly in supplying high-speed Internet connections. Wireless offers competitors a way around that duopoly, said Andrew Cole, vice president for wireless at A.T. Kearney.

"We're working with Intel and Motorola in a phase of technology evaluation," said Len Barlik, Sprint vice president of technology research and development. "Our evaluation may lead us to commercial deployment."

Sprint, which holds licenses for radio spectrum at 2.5 megahertz, has been looking for commercial products to utilize that spectrum. Its wireless broadband service, launched in 2001 from antennas atop the Sears Tower, worked well, but costs for equipment and installation made the service unprofitable for Sprint.

"That was a first-generation proprietary technology," said Barlik. "Over the years we've looked at a number of different technologies."

Because Wi-Max is an open standard, it is expected that several vendors will produce equipment, which should drive down prices as happened with Wi-Fi.

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Nextel Communications Inc. has announced it will test broadband wireless technology using the 2.5 megahertz segment of radio spectrum in the Washington, D.C., area. Nextel is in the process of being acquired by Sprint.

TowerStream Corp., which offers wireless broadband connections to business customers in Chicago and other large cities, plans further testing of Wi-Max in New York later this year, said Jeff Thompson, the firm's president.

Sprint is working with Motorola to test smart antennas and multimedia devices, Barlik said. The carrier is interested in how well smart phones, personal digital assistants and, perhaps, even hand-held electronic game players can send and receive Wi-Max signals.

Wi-Max standards are still being written, and carriers are especially interested in a Wi-Max standard for mobile service expected to be completed within a few months.

Cole said that mobility must be part of the equation for wireless broadband to compete. A fixed wireless service that merely duplicates offerings from cable and phone operators isn't economically attractive, he said.

But a wireless connection that can be used at home or down the street at a park provides a competitive advantage.

"I'm bullish on Wi-Max," said Cole. "There is a lot of hype, but there's also a lot of substance."

Cole predicted that commercial Wi-Max services will be available within two years.

Thompson said carriers hope mobile Wi-Max equipment may be available early next year.

"We're seeing better handsets," said Thompson. "There are devices that can switch from one network to another seamlessly. These are really exciting times in telecom."

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