

# TAMPA BAY Business Journal

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## Voda takes its wireless expertise into public WiFi

Tampa Bay Business Journal - by [Jane Meinhardt](#) Staff Writer



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ST. PETERSBURG — Voda LLC, a St. Petersburg startup founded to take commercial technology from the **University of South Florida** to the marketplace, aims to tread where much larger companies got lost. Voda WiFi has created three hotspots in St. Petersburg and intends to establish a public WiFi network covering the business districts in Pinellas and Hillsborough counties.

The ambitious business model is different from that of the companies that once vied for setting up a WiFi network that would encompass the entire city of St. Petersburg, said Paul Swider, Voda's WiFi communications manager.

Four proposals were received last year when the city issued an request for proposals for the citywide wireless broadband network.

Atlanta-based **EarthLink Inc.** won the right to build the network and estimated it would cost the company approximately \$6.8 million but expected to recover its investment through subscription charges and hourly charges. However, EarthLink notified the city in October 2007 that it would not pursue the project because it was reorganizing its strategy and a free municipal WiFi network no longer fit into its plans.

“Part of the problem with that model is that it would cover every square inch from the top down, all funded by subscriptions and advertising,” Swider said. “It remains to be seen exactly what our coverage will be, but in our model, third-party sponsors can project the network to an area. We can build the network quickly because we don't need rental agreements or physical property.”

Voda hopes to have a “meaningful” network in place by the Super Bowl, he said.

A WiFi network is not a big jump from Voda’s existing technology expertise. The company uses wireless communication in its outdoor multisensor networks equipped with environmental monitoring products. Voda initially is offering to fund the best sites for WiFi to introduce the service to businesses. The concept involves plugging into a business’ existing broadband connection and creating a WiFi cloud in the neighborhood.

Every access point recognizes the others, and users log in once to access the entire network.

“We will create a network in business areas building off existing networks, and ideally the goal is to have some or all free access,” Swider said. “We will build off the existing network where people are most likely to use WiFi, and partner with the businesses that want it and share the expense. We supply the network management.”

For businesses opting into the network, their advertising is projected over the entire network — on both sides of Tampa Bay — and can be changed in real time.

Voda is testing software and hardware for the WiFi network. Swider estimated that the most expensive set up for a business would cost around \$500.

John Armbruster, assistant director of St. Petersburg’s IT department, was intrigued by Voda’s idea.

“I would certainly like to see their business model,” he said “There is such a demand for access to the Internet. It would be a huge benefit for the city, not only for businesses but we could leverage it in a lot of ways.”

The city currently has no plans to again seek a citywide WiFi provider but would like to explore what Voda has in mind for its network.

“It all comes down to the number of access points and the cost per point, but this is a real consideration,” Armbruster said.

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