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Case #4: Wireless Philadelphia and sequel

The primary aspect of this case revolves around the city of Philadelphia's efforts at providing low-cost or no cost wireless internet access citywide. The objectives of the city's plan are:

- To transform Philadelphia into a city on the cutting edge of wireless accessibility
- To attract more businesses and tourist to the city
- To save the city money by reducing its telecommunications costs
- To provide low-income populations with low-cost internet access

The case covers a period of about six months between April and October 2005 from the time the Wireless Philadelphia plan is announced to the time when the pronouncement is made that the city will partner with Earthlink to build and maintain its wireless network. Naturally, the city faces pushback from established telecommunications and cable companies such as Verizon and Comcast, who hold a monopoly on the internet connection options offered in the area. These internet providers and others criticize the proposal as not being well thought-out, therefore making the goals unachievable. Opponents indicate that the expense and effort by the city are unnecessary since the current internet access offerings are sufficient. In addition, they maintain that the plan does not adequately consider issues of security or the cost of upgrades and maintenance. Nor, challengers say, do proponents consider that the plan could actually limit the internet access options available to consumers as companies decide not to compete with a city government that can subsidize its internet network with tax dollars.

Backers of the proposal on the other hand point out that Wireless Philadelphia will provide a low cost internet access alternative to the higher priced offerings of Verizon and Comcast, and that the city's efforts will drive competition that will lead to greater advances in the wireless technology field and more offerings to consumers.

Although the city of Philadelphia's ambitions are admirable, its efforts at establishing a wireless network by partnering with a private company raises the issue, as theorized by Woodrow Wilson, of the ability of government to ensure "effectiveness and accountability" where the government is no longer in the position of management via delegation and hierarchical authority (Kettl, 2002, p.51). Yet *effectiveness and accountability* can be better achieved by establishing a contract between partners that outlines clear goals, outcomes and performance measures. The *principal-agent* theory discussed in Kettl is relevant in this context in that the quality of the service or product provided ultimately depends on the organizational structure and processes outlined in the contract between the principal (the city of Philadelphia) and its agency/partner – Earthlink (Kettl, 2002).

The effectiveness of this agreement can be further ensured by making use of the "*adaptive management*" tactic proposed by Goldsmith and Eggers, which encourages ongoing feedback and evaluation throughout the project implementation (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004). A relevant aspect of gathering feedback would be to solicit citizen involvement during the planning phase to gauge interest rather than as King and Stivers state, "Defining problems and issues before asking citizens what they think..." (King and Stivers, 1998, p.201). According to Denhardt, public organizations have a responsibility in helping the public identify and express their needs as well as a desire for particular solutions (Denhardt, 2000). Getting the public input is especially relevant in this situation since a lack of public interest has contributed to the downfall of various municipal wireless network projects in the last few years. Adopting a *strategic management* process that involves fully integrating all functions and activities on the part of the participating city department and Earthlink so that service delivery, performance management and other administrative systems are driven by a shared mission and values, will also be a key component of the program's success (Poster and Streib, 1999).

References:

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