

## Waiting to fly? Jump on to the World Wide Web

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Nashville International Airport terminal now boasts wireless Internet service, for a fee.

By BUSH BERNARD

Staff Writer

Steven Peterson decided to kill an hour yesterday sipping a beer and surfing the Internet while waiting for a flight out of Nashville International Airport.

The Fort Hood, Texas, resident was among the first people to use a new wireless pay Internet service that airport officials unveiled yesterday.

The service costs travelers \$6.95 a day and eventually is expected to bring in more than \$400,000 a year to the Metropolitan Nashville Airport Authority, the agency that oversees airport operations.

Though the money will help to compensate for pay phone revenue that disappeared as cell phones gained in popularity, the emphasis yesterday was on the customer-service aspect of wireless Internet, more commonly known as WiFi.

The effort to install WiFi began more than three years ago, but the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks put those plans on hold, Airport President Raul Regalado said.

"WiFi was not high priority at that point," Regalado said. "We were focused on other things in response to 9-11."

The economic turmoil that hit the country after the attacks also affected the airport's plans.

"There was a whole shaking-out of the WiFi industry," Regalado said. "The companies that we had spoken to, and were prepared to recommend prior to 9/11 ... once 9/11 hit, a number of them were no longer around."

The industry has since settled down, he said. "And we know who the players are, and they'll be around for a while."

**Concourse Communications** Group of Chicago is handling the airport's WiFi service. Nashville is the company's sixth airport customer. It provides WiFi service to the three main New York airports, as well as airports in Detroit and Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minn.

It is scheduled to initiate WiFi service at the airport in Ottawa, and O'Hare International and Midway International airports in Chicago, Concourse Senior Vice President Richard Snyder said.

The WiFi system operates like similar systems in hotels, restaurants and coffee shops across America. Users locate the network using the operating system's network management software. Once they configure the connection, a welcome page comes up when they launch their browser.

There are a few free pages and a sign-up page, where users sign on using a credit card to pay for the service.

The company also sells WiFi access to airport tenants at rates comparable to what DSL subscribers pay, Snyder said. Network performance is a little faster than a DSL network, he said.

Peterson said he's been to airports that have free access, usually sponsored by a company or agency such as the local chamber of commerce. He's also seen paid service at other airports.

"I wish it was free," Peterson said. "I'm a Continental President's Club member. Usually, I get free service in the club, but there's not one here. This is the next best thing."

Free service wasn't an option for the authority, which operates on self-generated revenue.

"Somebody's got to pay for the infrastructure," Regalado said.

Concourse installed the system at no cost to the authority.

"They've got to recover their cost plus make a profit to stay in business," Regalado said.

The airport's share of revenue is estimated to be \$30,000 this year. But that could rise to \$450,000 or more a year over the next five years, airport spokeswoman Lynne Lowrance said.

The added revenue from WiFi will help offset money that once came from airport pay phones. As cellular phones have grown in popularity, airport pay phone revenue has dropped - from \$406,000 a year in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2000, to \$77,000 for the fiscal year that ended this past June.

"Pay phones are almost dead," Regalado said. "There's no way that anybody can come up with how to capture revenue off the use of cell phones, so we're having to look for replacement revenue."

Peterson said he was pleased with the WiFi access, which he used primarily to check his business e-mail.

"For the amount of time I'm going to be here, it's a little high," Peterson said of the cost. "But it's a business expense."

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#### BY THE NUMBERS

16

WiFi antennas throughout the Nashville International Airport terminal

802.11b/g

Standard WiFi technology protocol used in the system

12,000

People who get on planes each day at Nashville International

720

People estimated to use the WiFi system each day

262,800

People estimated to use it each year

\$6.95

Fee for a 24-hour period

\$450,000

Estimated cost to install system

\$1.8 million

System's estimated annual gross revenue

\$456,000

The airport's estimated annual take after five years

PHOTO BY LARRY MCCORMACK / STAFF:

Travelers such as Larry Donofrio of New Jersey are able to access the Internet, for a fee of \$6.95 per day, through a high-speed wireless connection at the Nashville International Airport.