The City of Owensboro seeks funding to assist its efforts in establishing a WiFi presence in five of its heaviest utilize park regions. The wireless city project represents a community vision initiative aimed at stimulating the creation of a demand for broadband services within the learning, government and visitor/tourism sectors in the Owensboro area. The service will be offered free to its citizens and local area businesses located in the WiFi zones of coverage. The project has five distinct goals: 1. Enhance business revenues and district economic viability, by a. Attracting more customers and increasing purchases b. Using the Wi-Fi web pages to market local products and services 2. Increase productivity and sustainability of small businesses by a. Increasing access to online resources b. Lowering Internet costs 3. Increase the use of Owensboro.gov. 4. Learn the technical requirements for municipal Wi-Fi deployment. 5. Encourage mixed use and greater public safety in the parks. With the goals stated, what are the objectives in building a $292,754.55 WiFi project in the Owensboro City Parks. A). One result of this initiative is to set the cornerstone for the revitalization of the city’s park system, with an emphasis on the riverfront area adjacent to downtown Owensboro. While development has occurred in the suburban fringe, downtown Owensboro has seen a decline over the past 30 years. Over the last thirty six months, however, downtown Owensboro has increasingly become the focus of community dialogue. After years of neglect, citizens are demanding action to implement a downtown redevelopment strategy. While the Ohio River, waterfront recreational opportunities, RiverPark Center, and government services have been draws into downtown Owensboro, there has been a lack of cohesive efforts in revitalizing downtown. In 1986 the city adopted a revitalization plan that proposed recommendations to rejuvenate downtown as a center for arts, cultural, business, and government activities. New impetus for this downtown initiative resurfaced in 2007. Since that time the city has constructed several recreational venues and continues to work diligently with local sponsors for community events such as 'Friday after Five'. Plans are in place to continue this positive progression with a campaign to build a hotel/convention center, Marina, Multi-Purpose Indoor Events Center and a Market Square Public Plaza. B). Though the first phase of this WiFi initiative is relatively small, five park regions, the city’s plan to expand on this operational WiFi network holds promise for the city’s, as well as neighboring, First Responders. Starting in 2004, the City of Owensboro, working in conjunction with seven neighboring counties, received funds from three Kentucky Office of Homeland Security (KOHS) grants. The funds implemented a comprehensive communications program designed to provide police and fire vehicles with Mobile Data Computer (MDC) capabilities. To date, the consortium possesses over 200 MDC’s, 90 in Daviess County and Owensboro alone. These networks were designed to operate solely on a 19.2 Kbps infrastructure (standard speeds for most systems in the U.S.). Although this initiative was
instrumental in placing the ‘laptops in vehicles’, the inherently slow speeds continue to limit their effectiveness. This project will help the Police Department and Fire Department to respond more quickly and effectively to calls for aid, providing a higher level of safety for citizens of Owensboro and any others who call for help while in this jurisdiction. The Fire Department is currently evaluating response times with the intention of measuring current responses against responses once the system is operational. In addition, once the network is up, it will be offered to other public safety agencies while operating in Owensboro. Faster data speeds will enable fire fighters and EMA responders to receive area maps, view video on situations such as how to pry open a broken train door or how to safely shut off electrical power, and allow multiple responders from numerous agencies to view the same images and data simultaneously. Better and faster data can be sent to emergency rooms to prepare them for incoming accident victims. Police will enjoy the benefits of WiFi along side their fire fighter counterparts. The rapid upload of video and data from on-the-ground law enforcement personnel to police command center will allow monitoring of officers or suspects in high-risk situations. Images and fingerprints of suspects, video clips of criminal activity, and layouts of areas can be downloaded to police vehicle computers. Security parameters will be set into place to ensure that the first responders and services are isolated from the general public. C). While the downtown project and the city's first responders will benefit tremendously, one of the primary reasons for the adoption of this project can be summed up in two words: Digital Divide. Like similar communities, the Digital Divide separates Owensboro residents into two or more parts based on access to high tech - those with access to digital devices and broadband Internet and those without such access. This "digital divide" has ever greater implications, because such modern information technologies as the telephone, television, computers and the Internet play an ever more dominant role in our daily lives. The digital divide exists not only between those in Owensboro and those in neighboring rural regions, but also between Haves and Have Not's inside cities. This digital divide also exists between the educated and the uneducated, and between economic classes. The Digital Divide is actually growing wider; despite efforts to bridge it, because new technological advances extend the frontier faster than social programs close the gap. While many social equity arguments are made to provide ubiquitous, universal and affordable broadband network access, network economics also make a sound economic argument to bridge the digital divide. The value of any network is equivalent to the square of the number of nodes on the network, so that value increases rapidly as nodes are added to the network. It follows then, that programs that bridge the digital divide and add more users benefit not only those disadvantaged, disconnected individuals, but also all the other users of the network. With such network growth, networked sites reach ever more network users via the network, whether they are customers, constituents, family or friends. Low-income households have among the lowest rate of broadband adoption and cite high costs of service as a barrier to access. Even though broadband services may be fully deployed in a geographic area, if residents cannot afford the price point offered, broadband will still be inaccessible. Therefore, city leaders support a plan to incorporate three types of programs which can reduce costs and provide affordable broadband to low-income communities in such a region: 'Deploy municipal or community-based networks' 'Increase capacity of community-based organizations to serve as access points in the community' 'Expand existing computer centers and their Internet capacity located in recreational centers throughout the city.