

# DeKalb's free Wi-Fi trial service still operating

Digital Lobby, city plan to move forward with public access to network

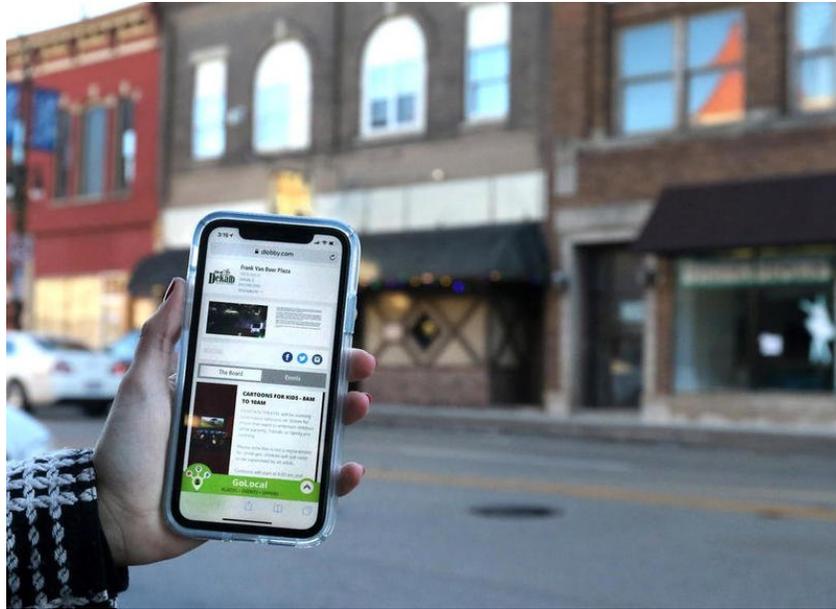
By KELSEY RETTKE

Jan. 4, 2019

DeKALB – A trial run of a free public Wi-Fi network in downtown DeKalb and at Northern Illinois University has been extended indefinitely.

The city and NIU [launched their free public Wi-Fi network in August](#), partnering with Indiana-based Digital Lobby during Corn Fest.

The trial [originally was expected to last two months](#), but solidifying the free public access network has had to take a back seat to other city priorities in past months, said Marc Thorson, the city's information technology director.



“When I came on board as part of the 2025 strategy plan for the city, one of the items listed was working toward a ‘smart’ city and providing more technology in the downtown area,” Thorson said.

Thorson said from his perspective, he still wants to pursue the project past the trial period. He is looking to new City Manager Bill Nicklas to provide some direction on the project, which would involve an intergovernmental agreement between NIU, the city and Digital Lobby to maintain the public network permanently. The agreement then will be brought to the City Council for a decision.

Digital Lobby does not charge the city for its services, Thorson said.

Kevin Niebergall, founder and president of Digital Lobby, is overseeing his company's efforts.

“We're very excited about our relationships with DeKalb and NIU, and super excited to bring this to the community,” Niebergall said.

The Wi-Fi network is operational in the downtown area, starting at the intersection of First Street and Lincoln Highway and going to Van Buer Plaza. Users can access the network on any digital device as long as they're in the geographical area, or buildings that are part of the network.

Accessing the network is simple: When downtown, users can choose "DeKalb Free Wi-Fi" as an option on their phone or other digital device settings. Once connected, users either can log in through their Facebook page, or using an email address and zip code. Similar to the home screen that automatically pops up when one uses Starbucks Wi-Fi, the DeKalb one includes a primary sponsorship page, with a GoLocal tab on the bottom. Users can click on the GoLocal tab to access the portal of information.

Niebergall said the GoLocal aspect of the free Wi-Fi network is key to understanding the benefits for the city and NIU.

"It ties the whole community together," Niebergall said.

He said the portal houses announcements, event postings and promotional information, which creates a "communiversity" hub for users to access.

Matt Duffy, executive director for the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, said having free Wi-Fi in DeKalb is "almost a requirement" in the digital age. The Chamber helped identify specific downtown businesses to take part in the trial run.

"In today's world, everybody is utilizing phones, tablets, laptops, and anytime you have access to that, the community is much more valuable," Duffy said.

On the back end, Thorson and Digital Lobby can collect analytics, user information and some basic demographic information. All users are anonymous, regardless of whether they log in through Facebook or with an email address, Thorson said. If users log in through Facebook, analytics still are anonymous but can provide gender and geographical information.

"The ultimate goal is to really understand our customers, which is our residents, students, visitors and businesses," Thorson said. "This is just one avenue where we can start gathering more information to make better decisions."