

# City looks to recoup broadband rights

By Drew Setterholm Daily Press Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, February 4, 2014 2:00 am

The city of Montrose is dissatisfied with the current climate of broadband connectivity in the region, and on April 1, it will ask voters to restore its right to provide that service to the public.

At tonight's city council meeting, the council is expected to approve a resolution to place a question on the general election ballot. It will ask city voters whether the city may recoup its right to provide telecommunication services, advanced services and cable television services. The city's main focus with the measure is on advanced services, particularly expanding the region's broadband capabilities.

"We've been working on improving our broadband in the community for quite some time," Virgil Turner, city director of innovation and citizen engagement, said. "The city has recognized that broadband is an area where we are not on equal footing with the Front Range."

The city sees the lack of broadband connectivity as such a hindrance, particularly in the business sector, that it is ready to explore options to provide that service itself, either directly or through a public-private partnership.

Before Montrose can open that door, though, it needs the approval of its voting citizenship. According to state legislation implemented in 2005, municipalities are prohibited from providing telecommunication and advanced services. A city can recoup that right if the issue is placed on a ballot and approved by voters.

If the city can enter the discussion on providing advanced telecommunication services, Turner said the face of business in the region could change drastically.

"I think the goal of the [city] council is to be able to have broadband not as a hindrance but as a benefit here, as people want to move their business, or move here and work for the company they currently work for, but be able to enjoy the quality of life we have here in Montrose," Turner said.

Montrose has amenities the Front Range does not, Turner said, but being able to live and work in a community is about more than the natural beauty of the area.

"You also have to be able to obtain the services that you need to make a living, and broadband is one of those services," Turner said.

The 2005 legislation was heavily lobbied by telecommunication providers, Turner explained. A ballot initiative will likely draw opposition from both large providers and local providers crying foul, he admitted. Anecdotal evidence from business owners and residents continually speaks to the area's limitations for high-speed connectivity, Turner said, and the city needs to overcome that hurdle.

More than 300 cities nationwide have already taken the same step, Turner estimated, including nearby Mountain Village, Cortez and Loveland.

“Those communities like Montrose have a different motivation than do the incumbent telecommunication providers,” Turner said. “Our motivation is that we have a great quality of life here, but our lack of broadband availability ... is degrading that quality of life. It’s forcing people to move to the areas where they can get the level of service they need. We see that as something that we can’t stand for.”

The city council is behind the effort; in fact, it was a main point in Mayor Judy Ann Files’ campaign for city council two years ago. The council has discussed the issue at length, she said, and is ready to act.

“Our state of Colorado has said the only way you can have local control is to have a vote of the people, so that’s what we’re going to do,” Files said.

The main benefit of local control, Files added, would be the positive economic impact on both businesses and telecommuters in the area.

The ballot initiative will not ask for any additional tax or funding — only for the voters’ approval. There will be a cost, eventually, Turner said, but it would depend on how the city decided to move forward if the vote passed. The ballot question would only open the door to more in-depth conversation.

“I think [the council is] very supportive of this and it’s a shared goal to move this forward,” Turner said. “Without advanced telecommunication services, we’re not going to see our community develop the way many want to see it develop.”

With no extra tax attached to the measure, Files said she did not see the issue as a “tough sell” to the voters of Montrose.

“I don’t think it’s a tough sell,” she said. “We can expect some opposition from the big corporations; it’s the big companies that have the state of Colorado tied down.”

Files said she expected little discussion on the council resolution at tonight’s meeting. Following that resolution, the city will have stringent limits on the information it can disseminate to voters, and the city absolutely may not campaign for or against the ballot measure.

A citizen group supporting a “yes” vote could form, Files said.

Ballot language is available to view on the city’s website, at [www.cityofmontrose.org](http://www.cityofmontrose.org).