SEATTLE MAYOR: I HAVE COMCAST, AND I WOULD LIKE BETTER SERVICE

Following the reaction to our investigative piece about Comcast's contributions to PACs involved in the Seattle mayoral race, we reached out to Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn for an interview about his broadband policies. McGinn has made gigabit fiber Internet access a cornerstone of his time in office and his reelection campaign. We have also invited McGinn's opponent, Sen. Ed Murray, to do an interview with us. This transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Mayor Mike McGinn delivers his 2012 State of the City address. (Jen Nance/office of the mayor via Flickr)

First, I have a personal question. Who is your Internet provider and are happy with your service?

My Internet is provided by Comcast, and I know my family would like better service. I will speak for my gamer son as well.

And tell me about your proposals for broadband, how they've come to fruition, and where you'd like to go in the future.

When I ran for office four years ago — and by the way I'd never held elected office before running for mayor of Seattle, unless you count Greenwood community council — and one of the things I ran on was bringing fiber to the premises. So when I took office I sat down with my department of information technology (DoIT) and our Seattle Public Utilities and Seattle city lights since they connect the whole city, too. So we hired consultants and the rest to start looking at how do we get fiber to the premises — to every home and business in Seattle. We competed for the Google Fiber, we didn't get it, it went to Kansas City, we looked at doing our own municipal fiber system in which we would basically build the fiber system — not be the provider of services but people could then provide the applications on the data network we built, which would be quite a capital lift, probably be quite a ballot measure, and the like.

Before we went down that path we looked at the fact that we had a fiber optic network in the city already that the city owns, it connects to all our facilities in the city, and we have a lot of unused fiber, what we call dark fiber. So we began thinking about if we could make that fiber available to the private sector to use as a way to leverage to build out fiber to the premise network.

We partnered with the University of Washington and a company called GigU, which works with universities around the country asking providers if they would wire university neighborhoods with fiber optic cable, and we put our dark fiber on the table there as an asset. And we also just put out an RFP to the public generally saying we need to win support from our city to do this.

The law originally had been we couldn't do this, but we changed it so that we could offer our dark fiber for lease at cost to the private sector. Gigabit Squared stepped forward and we've entered into an agreement with them for 14 pilot neighborhoods throughout the city. The goal is to make sure we're getting to a diverse set of neighborhoods, reaching our lower income neighborhoods as well as places where there are higher income folks and there will likely be greater penetration. And they have come forward with their build out plan. One of those neighborhoods is the University District, along with 13 other neighborhoods throughout the city as a starting point. And we're open to talking to anybody in addition to Gigabit Squared who would like to use your dark fiber. We're also obviously making available the opportunity to string lines along our telephone polls.

I understand in the past you actually worked with Comcast for some high-speed broadband contracts, for instance in Pioneer Square.

That's absolutely right — I sort of left out a stage. So we laid fiber optic cable for our own purposes and every time we went out into the roadway to lay conduit for our cable — the conduit is this big pipe through which the cables are pulled — we would partner with other public entities, so King County metro, the Seattle Public school district, and we'd ask for permission to say "as long as we're digging up the town and we have this opportunity to lay cable, would you like to do it as well?"

So we were digging up First Avenue, which goes into Pioneer Square which is one our oldest neighborhoods and those historic buildings are now owned by a lot of Internet start ups, companies that are doing apps, companies that are doing big data — and they want gigabit fiber. As long as we were digging up the street because we were moving other utility lines, we asked the city council for permission to make the conduit available for anyone in the private sector who wanted to string fiber optic cable through the conduit and the trench we were digging. So Comcast took us up on that offer, and as a result we were able to wire up the business on either side of Pioneer square — I'd have to look it up, but I think something like 50 businesses who were interested. That was before we did the Gigabit Squared proposal where were offered up our the dark fiber. In this case, we were just offering up the conduit and Comcast took us up on that and we made a deal.

How have you found the incumbent providers have reacted to the Gigabit Squared project and other private public opportunities?

You have to start with an understanding that you are trying to run the Internet on cables that were laid down for telephone service or cable service. We're trying to squeeze our Internet through that system which were never engineered for the level of service that our innovative companies now need. And our incumbent carriers, whether it's the cable and telecom companies have not historically — and this isn't just true for Seattle, it's true around the country — haven't been making the proper investments to bring fiber to the premises, to

upgrade their system. That's why four years ago when I ran I was so focused on how do we get fiber to the premises, how do we get some competition in this marketplace, and how do we support innovation in this city.

I remember when I was running four years ago speaking to someone, one of our big companies, F5. They build a lot of stuff for the Internet and they're shipping huge files around all over the place. And they need those types of speeds. So we would be choking off our own innovators if we didn't have it. So the big picture is just the incumbent providers, the cable companies and telephone companies, historically have not made the investments to upgrade. And they say they want to compete or they say they will be competitive, but they just haven't done it.

So, that's why we went out there and looked at a municipal fiber utility, but before we went to that significant step, we said let's see who in the private sector is prepared to partner with us to use our dark fiber to build. And that's open — we're going to 14 neighborhoods — any incumbent provider, any business, could come to us and say we'll take advantage of that for other areas in the city. We haven't seen them do that.

Could you go into more detail about how important you believe high speeds are for the innovation economy in Seattle?

Sure, and it's not even detail. We have Amazon, we have F5, we have an ecosystem of startups, we have biotech companies and big data companies. All of them now rely on the ability to move large amounts of data from place to place. And that's as important to us as being able to move ships in and out of port, or move trucks on the freeways. In fact, it's probably more important to our innovation economy here in Seattle. But we have a system that was only engineered for the cable and the telephone. What we're talking about is using fiber to the premise — a big fat pipeline with Gigabit download and upload speeds. Things like your television entertainment and telephone service, they just become applications that can ride through that pipeline as well. It's game-changing if you can do it.

How do you compare access to gigabit speeds to other cities and the international market?

What we know is that other cities and other countries are very far ahead of us in this country and we need to compete. I met with the mayor of Kansas City, Sly James, and he said that Google built them fiber optic in their city and they have kids moving into Kansas City who find apartment buildings who have Internet that's like turning on the tap — all the Internet they can handle. And they're [moving there] because they can do things there they can't do anywhere else. And I don't want to say anything negative about Kansas City, but we're Seattle. We should be attracting the innovators to come here. We should be competing for that. And that's what we want to do. More power to Kansas City for their success in doing that, because that is the future: being able to tap into that innovation and that creative talent.

That's what we want to do here as well. So we're definitely falling behind other places here because we built up a regulatory structure and historical structure in which the incumbent providers have very little incentive to make the kind of investments in high capacity to really support our business.

A tiny aside here: I have to admit that I am originally a Kansan.

And I'm listening to Sly James talk about what's going on there, and I want some of that here in Seattle! I think it's great. That's what cities are about, they're where people come to get connected. Good cities have good universi-

ties, good neighborhoods, they have connections that people make with each other because of the place they're in, they attract diverse people.

We have great ingredients here in Seattle. We don't have the connectivity that could come with gigabit speeds. I don't want to make it seem like there's no gigabit speeds here, of course the private market is responding in places where there's the most dense housing or demand from business. There is some supply in the marketplace, but the difference is what happens when you wire up a whole city, or a significant number of neighborhoods. What does that change?

I look at how connected people are to handheld computing, and that's changed so many things already. When mobile phones started, the thought was that they were going to be for wealthy people in their cars and it would replace their radios — and the very wealthiest people got certain parts of the FCC spectrum that could be used for mobile telephones. It didn't work out that way. Once you started putting that mobility in people's hands, a whole bunch of uses arose that no one could have imagined.

I think about what could happen if we could connect our school kids or our health-care providers or our niche small business to move things over their network that they couldn't possibly move before. What kind of competitive advantage would that give Seattle? I don't even think we can imagine what it could mean, any more than the few people at the beginning of mobile technology who saw what it would mean to have that level connectivity through mobile devices. But I don't think very many people did. But we can see that as an example of the extraordinary number of changes, many completely unpredictable, that people loved. So what could we do if we had gigabit download speeds connecting all the homes and business in a community — and a community like Seattle that is already about innovation?

Seattle's big jump was when people came here to get their picks and shovels and rain gear to head up to Alaska to dig for gold. Well, high-speed Internet is as important to our Pioneer Square now as that was then.

Do you have any specific comment on Comcast's contributions to various PACs during this race?

I just think it speaks for itself.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story listed Mayor McGinn's first name as Ed rather than Mike, and due to a a transcription problem this story originally quoted Mayor McGinn as referencing company Best Buy rather than F5. We apologize for the errors.*

> "That's why four years ago when I ran I was so focused on how do we get fiber to the premises, how do we get some competition in this marketplace, and how do we support innovation in this city."

Mike McGinn, Seattle Mayor