

America's Most Wired Cities

By Elizabeth Woyke, *Forbes.com*

Seattle takes the lead in our annual list of the most broadband-connected U.S. cities.



Move over, Atlanta. Seattle, home base of Microsoft and Amazon, is now the country's most wired city.

While these marquee names have long lent the Emerald City techy cachet, it was Seattle's increased use of broadband that powered it up Forbes' annual list of the 30 most broadband-connected cities in the U.S. High marks in two other wired city categories -- broadband access and Wi-Fi hot spots -- helped Seattle clinch the top spot.

Since 2007, Forbes has measured cities' wired quotient by computing the percentage of Internet users with high-speed connections and the number of companies providing high-speed Internet. Since many urban residents access the Internet by Wi-Fi, we also measure the number of public wireless Internet hotspots in a particular city.

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Our formula remains the same as previous years with one exception: the addition of broadband penetration data from Scarborough Research. The change was made to complement similar data from Nielsen Online.

Though Atlanta, Forbes' top wired city in 2007 and 2008, has been dethroned, the Big Peach continues to ride high at No. 2. The Southeast telecommunications hub boasts plenty of broadband users and lots of broadband service providers.

Washington, D.C., rocketed from No. 11 last year to a solid No. 3. Like Seattle, it made dramatic progress in its broadband adoption rate. It also improved its Wi-Fi hotspot showing to rank second only to Seattle.

D.C. scoops up another honor this year, as the wired city to watch, thanks to technophile President Barack Obama. Obama's support for universal broadband and fluency with mobile devices is expected to boost Internet and Wi-Fi access nationwide.

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Rounding out the top five wired cities are Orlando, Fla., and Boston. As the location of Walt Disney World, the destination of millions of tourists a year, Orlando is packed with broadband providers and Wi-Fi access points. Boston's strengths include a plethora of universities and an urbane population that help keep its broadband and Wi-Fi usage high.

The surprise of the list is Minneapolis, which improved its standing from No. 11 to No. 7, beating New York and Portland, Ore., among others. Minneapolis' secret? A particularly broad range of service providers, including a number of neighborhoods with 20 different access options for high-speed Internet.

North Carolina suffered the biggest drop, with Raleigh declining to No. 15 from No. 3 and Charlotte dropping to No. 20 from No. 7.

Three California powerhouse cities -- Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco -- shifted places this year to occupy the middle of the list. Los Angeles and San Diego improved their standings while San Francisco dropped seven places due to a relatively low number of broadband providers and Wi-Fi hotspots. However, its No. 1 rating in broadband adoption means that San Francisco can take pride in having the most tech-savvy residents of any U.S. city.



After California, Florida and Ohio placed the most cities on the list. Under Gov. Ted Strickland, Ohio has invested several millions of dollars in promoting Internet technology across the state. The ultimate goal is "100% broadband access in Ohio and greater awareness of the personal and economic growth potential" broadband can bring, says Keith Dailey, a spokesman for the Ohio governor's office.

Each year, a few cities slide off the list and a handful make their debut. Dallas and Houston fell just short of the top 30 this year while New Orleans (No. 18), Honolulu (No. 25), Cleveland (No. 26) and Austin, Texas, (No. 30) were added.

While this ranking aims to be as current as possible, advances in broadband technology sometimes outstrip the data available. Take No. 10 Baltimore and No. 14 Portland. The two cities are the first U.S. markets to be outfitted with Clearwire's new brand of superfast wireless broadband, WiMax. But the time lag inherent in collecting broadband data and the difficulty in measuring wireless broadband coverage by city means that neither city's standing takes WiMax into account.

That could change as soon as next year. A Federal Communications Commission spokesman says the agency plans to collect "considerably more detailed" information on broadband access in coming months. Mobile data usage is flourishing, which in turn is affecting the number of Wi-Fi hotspots that restaurants, cafés and retailers offer.

Obama's technology policies may have the biggest impact. In October, the Senate approved the Broadband Data Improvement Act, which calls for better federal and state data on the availability and quality of broadband service in the U.S.

Obama's broadband policy came into focus last month with a proposal for \$6 billion in grants for broadband infrastructure as part of a proposed economic stimulus package. The funds are intended to "provide business and job opportunities ... with benefits to e-commerce, education and health care" in underserved areas, according to the bill.

Technology policy groups are hoping for even greater government support. "It's a step in the right direction, but not as effective as what we need," says Robert Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. ITIF would like to see tax credit provisions for broadband as well as grants, which Atkinson calls "cumbersome" for companies.

"Investing in broadband will have an impact on jobs, education, health care and carbon emissions," says John Davies, vice president of Intel's World Ahead Program, which promotes technology access and education. So expect the next year or two to bring vast changes to all American cities, whatever their "wired" rank.

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