



Confidential Discussion Note

Community Wireless Roundtable : 8th January 2007

THE **OPLAN** FOUNDATION

Malcolm Matson : malcolm.matson@oplan.org

BACKGROUND

The OPLAN Foundation was set up in 2004 as an international *non-profit* organization with the over-arching goal of ‘*opening minds to open networks*’. **Open Public Local Access Networks (OPLAN)** can take any number of forms – ranging from massive fibre-based commercial initiatives in major cities in the developed world (e.g. Amsterdam and Utopia) through to small-scale community wireless initiatives in remote parts of the developing world - and everything in between. At the heart of *ALL* these OPLANS lie some common fundamental principles ... the primary beneficiary of the ‘value’ of the technologies deployed are the local users – not some absent owner providing access to the technologies as a fee-based ‘service offering’; that all users connected to the network are free to be ‘creators’ or ‘consumers’ of *bits* without differentiation (i.e. the network is truly ‘open’) and the infrastructure is operated and owned independent of any service, application or content that runs over it. (see www.oplan.org for more background)

The OPLAN Foundation currently has adopted three separate programs of activity in support of the above goal:

- a) through its web-platform (and other means as future funds permit) to enable a neutral meta-community of all OPLANS – actual and aspiring – enabling them to share knowledge, resources, experience and encouragement, on their own terms
- b) to be an unequivocal ‘end-user-centric’ advocate of the principles of *open public local access* – providing an increasingly respected and influential voice in the public arena to counter that of the current, vertically integrated vested interests in the telecoms and media industries which sustain and are sustained by, a largely outdated sector-specific public policy and regulation
- c) **to provide early stage seed funding (largely low or zero-interest loans) to ‘grass router’ initiatives in the developing world seeking to develop OPLANS (almost certainly wireless) and to link these initiatives with third-party technical and commercial expertise which will ensure their longterm sustainability and, where appropriate, scalability**

The OPLAN Foundation firmly believes that at this early stage in this world-changing communications revolution, locally-driven/centric open access deployments are likely to be of more importance (and yield greater benefit) in the developing world than massive national or ‘state-scale’ programs – despite the latter being the inevitable preference (for various reasons) of governments, major NGOs and their corporate sponsors).

To fund these three programs, the Trustees of the OPLAN Foundation are in the process of appointing an international firm of fund raisers and consultants to work with them. The initial target of this fund raising program is £5m (\$9.8m). A substantial proportion of this will be dedicated to what the Foundation currently refers to as its ‘**Grass Router Program**’ i.e. c) above. **The focus of the current discussion around the Community Wireless Roundtable relates exclusively to this grass router program.**

There already exists a remarkable informal global community of organizations, individuals and initiatives which are well placed to act as vital catalysts and resources to new local OPLAN initiatives in the developing world. The OPLAN Foundation is resolute in not wishing to duplicate, ‘eclipse’ or replace any of these other vital initiatives – all of which are complimentary to the Foundation’s over-arching goal. Many of these are represented at the Community Wireless Roundtable which is why this forum is so valuable to the Trustees as a sounding board to ensure that their decisions and actions support and enhance this work of others. However, in order to have maximum global impact, the Foundation wishes to act in an orderly and planned manner that is congruent with its own aims and goals as well as those of all other independent parties active in this arena.

The Foundation is also dedicated to using the funds it raises to seed and support OPLAN initiatives in the developing world that can reasonably be expected, in whatever manner, to be market sustainable. It will seek to avoid investing its funds in community network initiatives, regardless of their sponsorship, that are unlikely to be, for whatever reason, unsustainable in the longer term. From its knowledge and experience to date, the Foundation believes that there are *four* necessary, if not sufficient components to any community network initiative being market sustainable on an ongoing basis:

1. **one or more strong local community champions/entrepreneurs**
2. **access to relevant technical expertise, knowledge and experience**
3. **access to relevant commercial expertise to permit the development of a sustainable business model (if possible)**
4. **access to capital funding**



Currently, the Foundation's thinking and planning in this area can best be summarized by a series of statements and questions. The input, response and comment of those involved in the Community Wireless Roundtable is highly valued.

- Individuals and organizations sitting at the Roundtable can variously play a valuable role in one or more of the following:
 - I. identifying potential projects (i.e. that already have strong local community champions/entrepreneurs)
 - II. providing technical expertise and resource to both the initial design and build *and* ongoing support of the network
 - III. providing relevant commercial expertise to permit the development of a sustainable business model *and* ongoing management
- there are numerous other commercial and charitable bodies (not at this Roundtable) which will be well-placed to provide I. I. or III. above in specific circumstances
- the pre-agreed cost of providing II. and III. above will need to be reimbursed to the party providing them, as part of the overall project costs
- although the Trustees of the Foundation will, for legal reasons, retain ultimate responsibility for making any financial commitment to an applicant OPLAN project, they will wish to rely upon the qualified evaluation and recommendations of an experienced 'Investment Committee'. Members of the Roundtable (or their organizations) would make idea members of such a committee.
- What might the basis of membership of such an Investment Committee take? (i.e. cost reimbursement; length of appointment; *modus operandi*; permanent or ad-hoc project specific membership from a 'pool' ...)
- Would/should membership of the Investment Committee prohibit direct/indirect involvement in I. and III above (i.e. how to avoid any conflict of interest – actual or perceived)
- Do the individual members of the Roundtable (or their organizations) want to become involved (along with others) with the Foundation in the overall planning of the Grass Router Program (as opposed to its eventual operation described above)? This will involve consideration and planning of such issues as:
 - number and scale of potential projects to be funded
 - structure and format for applications
 - structure and format of financial loans/investment in individual projects
 - relationship with other commercial organizations (e.g. vendors) and NGOs
 - annual timetable for project applicants ... 'timetabled deadlines' versus ongoing 'no-timetabled'
 - determination of a policy and process for 'review' and evaluation of the projects – including the delivery of II. and III. above and the various parties responsible
- The Trustees of the OPLAN Foundation have been advised by their fund raising consultants that the likelihood of being successful in raising a substantial fund (as planned) will be substantially increased if potential donors can see for themselves the existence of support and participation from a wider community of interests – such as represented by the Roundtable. How might this support be best expressed/evidenced in the short-term (i.e. now) and during the forthcoming fund raising phase?

It is not expected, at the forthcoming Community Wireless Roundtable conference call, that any firm answers or conclusions to any or all of the above issues will emerge. Rather, that the participants will have an opportunity to consider together 'the process' by which the OPLAN Foundation trustees might work towards addressing these important issues. In particular, to consider the nature, extent (if any) of direct involvement and participation from any or all of those present at the Roundtable and or their respective organizations in helping to shape the structure of the Grass Router Program and its future implementation and more immediately, in lending 'endorsing support' which will assist with the fund raising programme .