



Washington Heights resident Anthony Ramos charges his mobile phone at a LinkNYC kiosk on Third Avenue at East 43rd Street in Manhattan on Wednesday, March 29, 2017. LinkNYC kiosks are replacing almost all of New York City's 6,000 remaining pay phones. *(Credit: Charles Eckert)*

LinkNYC continues rapid public Wi-Fi expansion in Brooklyn, Queens

By Ivan Pereira and Laura Figueroa ivan.pereira@amny.com, laura.figueroa@newsday.com March 29, 2017

An influx of outerboro communities will be linked in this year.

The city is on track to meet the 7,500 installation benchmark of its public kiosks, LinkNYC, by 2023 and the majority of the 150 confirmed to go online this spring and summer are in Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods including Astoria, Park Slope, Long Island City and Flatbush, according to the city's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication (DoITT).

The addition comes as a relief to city leaders and residents who have called for more equity in distribution of the new technology, which offers free phone service, WiFi, charging ports and has been replacing traditional payphones since its launch last year.

They're excited for the expansion even though the service has been at times beset by controversies ranging from the kiosks being monopolized by individuals looking at pornography and privacy concerns related to user data.

"I think to date there's been a concentration in Manhattan, and I've said we have to get the outer boroughs equally served, that is the aim," said Bronx City Councilman James Vacca, the chair of the Council's Committee on Technology, after receiving an update on LinkNYC Wednesday.

There have been roughly 150 new kiosks recently installed throughout the city, and they will be activated in the near future, according to CityBridge, the consortium behind the hot spots.

As of Wednesday, 667 Links were up and running in all five boroughs, the operator said.

"We have helped more than 1.3 million New Yorkers and visitors get online at the fastest speeds available in New York City, for free," Jen Hensley, LinkNYC's general manager, said in a statement.

The kiosks initially launched with a tablet that allowed users to browse the internet, but that capability has since been turned off due to complaints from residents. Now, visitors must have their own devices to access the free WiFi.

LinkNYC has generated \$37.3 million in advertising revenue since they launched and they're expected to generate \$25 million in the upcoming year, according to DoITT Commissioner Anne M. Roest, who testified at Wednesday's hearing.

Vacca is optimistic that the service will straighten itself out after a first-year rife with difficulties.

"We're not going back," Vacca said after the hearing. "We learned from the experience when the city initially rolled it out."

Some New Yorkers and civil rights groups such as the NYCLU expressed concern over users' data mining and privacy issues. Two weeks ago, CityBridge updated its privacy policy and sought to ensure users that the kiosks don't store or share personal information.

Last September, the city disabled the use of the stations' web browsers after fielding a number of complaints about people monopolizing the kiosks and spending hours surfing the internet, often for inappropriate material.

Irene Meisel, a member of the group RethinkLinkNYC who attended the City Council hearing, argued that the kiosks do not go far enough to achieve their primary goal, as stated by city officials: to close the "digital divide" faced by low-income New Yorkers without web access at home.

Meisel said her group would like to see the city direct some of the LinkNYC revenue to programs that increase digital access to underserved communities.

“The city has said that the Links were put up to address the digital divide. As they’re currently configured now we don’t see that they’re doing that,” she said.

About 150 new LinkNYC kiosks will go online in the coming months. Here is where you can find them.

Queens: Astoria, Long Island City, Rego Park, Elmhurst, Sunnyside, Forest Hills.

Brooklyn: Flatbush, Ditmas Park, Park Slope, Greenwood, Greenpoint, Bed Stuy and Crown Heights.

The Bronx: Melrose, Fordham Heights

Manhattan: Harlem, Midtown