

What the new LinkNYC 5G kiosks will mean for New Yorkers

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Opinion

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For more than one million New Yorkers living without access to high-speed internet, the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide that has plagued our city's most disenfranchised residents. Our neighbors inhabiting the wrong side of this chasm faced significant obstacles to signing up for vaccines, keeping in touch with friends and family and completing virtual assignments for school — activities many of us with a reliable connection took for granted. In a city as wealthy and technologically advanced as ours, the pandemic revealed the price of inaction — to individual aspirations, community well-being and our city's economic recovery — is too costly to conscience.

As New York City's chief technology officer, I am focused on ensuring that technology and innovation better the lives of New Yorkers as our city continues its post-pandemic revival. Integral to this mission is ensuring historically underserved New Yorkers have access to high-speed internet, whether on their block or in their home.



A Linknyc kiosk (Shutterstock/Shutterstock)

This Sunday, I joined Mayor Adams and CEO Nick Colvin of CityBridge, the operator of the LinkNYC program, in the Bronx to herald a major leap toward bridging the digital divide: the launch of the city's first Link5G. To truly be a global smart city of the future, we need ultra-fast 5G in every neighborhood, in every borough. Fifth-generation mobile technology, also known as 5G, will deliver enhanced mobile broadband capabilities up to 10 times faster than the speeds currently available, with immediate responsiveness and a higher capacity of service. Link5G will provide the much-needed infrastructure for wireless 5G technology to expand across every corner of the city.

The dawn of Link5G comes just seven years after the LinkNYC kiosks debuted. LinkNYC, which provides free Wi-Fi, phone calls and other digital services, continues to fill a profound need for New Yorkers and visitors to our great city. Last year, the system supported 425,000 calls per month, and nearly 11 million people have connected to Wi-Fi via LinkNYC since the program's outset. But the current digital revolution demands our city do more to meet New Yorkers' changing telecommunications needs.

Link5G will not only improve the lives of individual New Yorkers, of which an estimated 40% do not have home and mobile internet access, but entire neighborhoods and communities that have been left behind amid this century's rapid tech advances. The digital deserts that have persisted across our city's historically underserved areas will be transformed into fertile springs where the promise of tech — whether to create a small business, access essential services or engage with friends and family — will be realized.

Equity is at the heart of the Link5G rollout, and at the forefront of this administration's wider tech vision. Ninety percent of future Link5Gs will be located in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and above 96th St. in Manhattan. Eventually there will be 2,000 Link5Gs across the city, particularly in areas where broadband options are limited and foot traffic is heavy. The entire city will likewise benefit from the expansion of thousands of miles of fiber optic cables laid thanks to this program.

New internet service providers could, in the future, lease this fiber to bring more residential broadband options to New Yorkers, which could lead to more competition and lower prices. This expanded coverage area will go a long way toward clearing the technological barriers so many New Yorkers encountered during the pandemic.

One of the most noticeable changes between Link5G and the original LinkNYC kiosk deployed across the City since 2015 is the new design. Link5G is designed to accommodate equipment from multiple carriers allowing enhanced coverage in an area for customers of several wireless companies. Despite an increased height, they are no taller than existing street poles and are similar in appearance to existing 5G equipment on those poles. 5G is here to stay, and we will continue to engage communities to determine the best sites for these structures.

While Link5G is a monumental step forward, it is just one piece of our digital equity strategy. The Adams administration views broadband as essential to modern life as a utility like hot water or electricity. Through the city's new Big Apple Connect program, we anticipate hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers in low-income housing will receive free broadband by year's end.

As we rebound from the pandemic, New York City's potential is boundless. Our city is poised to succeed when all New Yorkers have access to the opportunities and services high-speed internet provides. Achieving these goals won't happen overnight, but the expansion of tech projects like Link5G and Big Apple Connect are victories we can all celebrate.

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