

The Washington Post

Computers Proposed for Affordable Housing

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Thursday, May 11, 2000; Page B04

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan proposed a multimillion-dollar plan yesterday to bring two affordable-housing complexes into the technology age by wiring them for high-speed Internet access and providing residents with computers.

The \$6.5 million plan would represent a small step toward bridging what policymakers in the Washington region and across the country call a "digital divide" separating those wealthy enough to afford computers from those who cannot. The issue has generated concern in Washington's tech-savvy suburbs that, at a time of historic affluence, the gap between rich and poor is widening because of unequal access to technology.

Less than one-third of Montgomery households do not have computers. But as the economy's best jobs increasingly rely on high-tech expertise, Montgomery officials worry that those mostly poor residents who do not are being shut out of high-paying careers.

"When you think of jurisdictions that should be able to make technology available to everyone, Montgomery should be at the top of the list," Duncan (D) said.

Duncan's plan, outlined during a morning news conference, would spend \$6.5 million over the next four years to wire all 230 apartments at the Stewartown Homes complex in Montgomery Village and Shady Grove Apartments in Rockville. The work would be done over the next 14 months as part of broad renovations at the two developments, where more than half the households make less than \$10,000 a year.

The pilot program would rely on \$2.7 million in private-sector money and contributions. It is similar to a project underway in the District at the Edgewood Terrace Apartments, an 884-unit complex north of Rhode Island Avenue NE. That project received contributions from Microsoft, Bell Atlantic and Data General, among others.

About 330 apartments at Edgewood Terrace have been wired for the Internet with an additional 300 expected to be finished by the fall. The nonprofit behind the project is the Community Preservation and Development Corp. The group would manage the Montgomery program, representing its biggest foray into the suburbs so far.

"We talk about this digital divide all the time, but the reality is that if we don't address it, we will not be creating a wealthier society," said Albert J. Browne, the group's vice president.

Duncan's plan, which would need County Council approval as the budget season speeds to conclusion later this month, would also pay for computer learning centers at each complex. The centers would have classrooms, teleconferencing and video equipment, and day care--all designed to encourage adults to learn about computers and potential careers in the field.

Across the Potomac, Fairfax County operates learning centers in seven public housing complexes, mostly geared toward helping schoolchildren with homework. But Fairfax has not wired apartments for the Internet.

Duncan's plan would tap the county cable television fund for \$3.19 million over the next four years. The balance would come from community block grants, the county's Housing Opportunities Commission and the private sector.

But council members expressed concern yesterday over the plan's cost--averaging \$28,000 per apartment--and Duncan's proposal to pay for it. The county executive drew down the cable fund by \$1.1 million earlier this year, which essentially delayed four high schools from getting high-speed Internet access for a year.

Rita Davis, 40, is one resident who hopes the proposal will pass sooner than later. Davis has lived at Stewartown Homes for 21 years, and while her 15-year-old son Kimon has a computer now, it is broken. She said he is asking for Internet access for his birthday later this month, but she cannot afford it.

"He plans on going to college and to go into business," said Davis, a homemaker. "He does his homework on it, newsletters for sister's job, and other things. At times, he shows me things on it, but I mainly use it to play solitaire. But I will take more interest in it, and I think this is going to benefit me, too."

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