

# Faster Web's on the way

## Fed grant to boost broadband service in public libraries

BY DANIEL BEEKMAN

FOR SOME people, better Internet access means quicker downloads or faster Facebook.

But for Bronxite Luis Lopez, an unemployed veteran, the city's plan to upgrade its public computer labs could mean finding a job.

Nearly 50 Bronx and uptown Manhattan libraries, housing projects and senior centers are slated for upgrades over the next three years, thanks to a new \$14 million grant from the Broadband Technologies Opportunity Program — a federal stimulus fund.

The city's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications will manage the grant, which Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. called "fantastic news" for "the borough that unfortunately has the highest number of households without broadband Internet service at home."

Lopez is one of millions who logs on for free at the New York Public Library because he doesn't have a computer.

The former truck driver visits the Morrisania library every weekday to search for jobs online.

"The library's free computers are good for me and for the children, because this is a high-crime area," said Lopez, 53. "The library is where they come to escape."



The Morrisania library is slated for Web upgrades to help patrons like Mohammed Idrissa, 17. Photo by Victor Chu

The Morrisania library — where children and adults wait to go online for as few as 10 minutes on one of 13 computers — is one of those slated for an upgrade. Lopez often runs out of time applying for a job online.

"We don't have enough computers," said librarian Colbert Nembhard. "We see long lines in the afternoon and our Internet is very slow."

The planned upgrade will increase the Morrisania library's Internet speed from 1.5 to 10 megabytes per second and could be "the difference be-

tween a child getting his homework done or not getting it done," said Nembhard.

Many seniors face different challenges — they don't know how to surf the Web.

That is why the nonprofit Older Adults Technology Services will use more than \$2 million of the federal grant to train seniors for the digital age at 16 Bronx and uptown Manhattan senior centers, said OATS Executive Director Tom Kamber.

The Internet "should be the single greatest resource for isolated, low-income seniors," he

said. "But the Internet has become a barrier between non-computer savvy seniors and the rest of the world."

Demand is greatest in the Bronx, said Kamber. The federal grant will train at least 1,500 seniors.

Trained by OATS four years ago, Areatha Bryant of Castle Hill now scours the Internet for better doctors and emails her nephews.

"I occasionally read the news and check the lottery," chuckled Bryant, 81. "The Internet is important because you can keep in touch with what's going on."

## DOE tells Crotona children's center to pay up or get out

BY ROB SGOBBO

A POPULAR Bronx community center has been told to pay up or pack up — after the city's Education Department reneged on a decade-long verbal agreement to house the center's children's programming rent-free.

The Mary Mitchell Family and Youth Center in Crotona has a two-week reprieve before it has to start paying rent to the DOE — \$75,000 a year — an amount that staffers believe will close the center for good.

"It would be impossible to come up with the money," said center Executive Director Heidi Heins. "We would have to fire all of our staffers. It would be unconscionable."

The center is asking the city to give it full ownership — and end its 10-year fight for permanent residence.

"The building is rightfully ours — we developed this from the ground up," Heins argued.

Mary Mitchell, a longtime Crotona resident, began the center's programming in the 1970s — providing after-school care to Bronx youngsters in a warehouse to keep them off the borough's crime-ridden streets.



Supporters of after-school center protest DOE's 75G rent demands. Photo by Jeanne Noonan

When the building burned down, she and local volunteers lobbied the city to build the current \$3.5 million home on Mapes Ave.

Starting with little money or credit, the center's board approached the DOE to become the building's anchor tenant — and eventually full owner in 2000.

But Heins said she wasn't worried — the board made a verbal agreement with the DOE to stay there rent-free — that is, until now.

"There are real costs associated with the maintenance of any DOE building, including custodial services and security," said DOE spokeswoman Barbara Morgan.

"Given the current fiscal reality," she continued, "we are asking community organizations who have not been paying for these services to begin covering these costs."

A financial crunch is also hurting the center, which fears it will have to shut its doors to the 400 kids it serves each year through its after-school programs if an agreement isn't reached quickly.

"We serve the city's poorest children and we're mostly run by volunteers from the community," Heins said. "Why would they do this?"

In the meantime, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. and City Councilman Joel Rivera are working with the DOE to forge a compromise.

"We're providing arts and athletics — things that some public schools don't offer," said Ella Williams, secretary of the center's board. "I just hope we can keep doing it."

## More Local News

### Parking help in square

Some parking woes in the Westchester Square shopping district appear to be over — at least when it comes to traffic enforcement agents hogging spots intended for shoppers.

A local parking garage owner has come to terms with the city on a contract to house the personal cars and official cruisers used by the NYPD's Traffic Enforcement agents, said City Councilman Jimmy Vacca (D-East Bronx).

The agents have their local headquarters in the square, and have been parking their cars at metered spots throughout the area, angering the square's merchants.

Officials said the license should be executed by the end of November and agents should be parking in the garage by the end of the year.

### Community carnival

The Moshulu Montefiore Community Center, at 3450 DeKalb Ave., is holding registration for fall classes and programs as well as an open house and free carnival from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Saturday.

Events include fun activities, sample classes, bounce castle, face painting, free child fingerprinting and ID card, free karate and boxing workshops.

For more information and class details, call (718) 882-4000.

### Meet 'Wondrous' author

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Diaz will read from his works and sign books, at 12:30 p.m. next Monday; free, in the Lovinger Theatre on the Lehman College campus at 250 Bedford Park Blvd. West.

For more information, dial (718) 960-8556.

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