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Class Project: Poor Texans Get Free Wi-Fi

Disadvantaged Texans in Houston's Pecan Park neighborhood are getting free or reduced Wi-Fi broadband in part as a class project by an electrical engineering research group at **Rice University**. The project, which covers 1.6 square miles, was designed and built by faculty and students in what's being called the **Rice Network Group**, working with the **Houston Public Library** and the nonprofit **Technology For All** (TFA) foundation.

What the Rice team has built is one of the largest Wi-Fi meshes in the United States aimed at low-income populations – possibly the largest such broadband effort. The physical infrastructure consists of a dozen omni-directional 802.11 mesh boxes. The whole thing is controlled by open-source software.

Residents of the area, who typically don't have the money to pay for commercial broadband service, can get as much as 1 Mb/s broadband for reduced rates and lower-bandwidth service for free. Eligibility is set by the Houston Public Library, which also requires users to attend a training course.

The entire megilla is more than just a social project; there appears to be new broadband technology involved as well. It seems that Rice researchers have developed a technology they called Transit Access Points (TAPs), in which wireless transmitters pass information among one another, creating a "multi-hop" network that costs far less to operate than conventional networks because it requires only a single wireline connection to the Internet.

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