

A blown deadline won't cost Omaha libraries after all.

They stand to receive more than \$50,000 from the Universal Service Fund after the Federal Communications Commission granted a waiver on Friday.

Library officials plan to use the money on Internet upgrades that should translate into faster downloads and fewer connection problems for patrons.

"It's great news for us," Library Director Rivkah Sass said when she heard about the waiver.

The library has ongoing discussions about ways to address problems with its Internet access, and the federal money will help, Sass said.

First, library officials want to increase the system's bandwidth. That should improve download speeds at the traditional computer stations.

The move also would help pave the way for providing wireless access and stations where patrons could download audiobooks onto their MP3 players, Sass said.

The configuration of the library's network also will be a focus. Now, all of the branches are hooked into the main server. When the server crashes, it shuts down Internet access at all 10 locations. That situation happened just a few weeks

ago, when Internet access was down systemwide for almost 24 hours, Sass said.

The Universal Service Fund gives rebates every year to libraries and schools for expenses incurred in providing Internet access and other telecommunications technology.

Last year marked the first time that the joint city and country technology department, DOT.Comm, was in charge of filing the paperwork for Omaha libraries' share of that money. The department was in the midst of a top management transition at the time and missed a key April 2005 deadline.

It appeared at first as though the libraries would simply not be able to receive the funding in question.

After learning of the missed deadline, Sass solicited the help of Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., in obtaining a waiver of the deadline.

Terry, along with Nebraska Sens. Chuck Hagel, a Republican, and Ben Nelson, a Democrat, sent a letter to the FCC in support of the library's case. Sass said she was grateful for that support.

Terry praised the FCC's decision Friday and said it's important that the library provides access to the Internet.

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