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Free online access at Eppley surprises some

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Paul Holman sat down by a window overlooking a runway at Eppley Airfield and pulled out his credit card.

Laptop in front of him, the business traveler from New Jersey was expecting to pony up some cash to connect to the airport's wireless Internet service.

Then he got a surprise: It was free.

"It's cool - very, very cool," said Holman, who was waiting for his Continental Airlines flight back to the Garden State. "I think it's excellent."

Wireless Internet at Eppley used to cost visitors \$3.95 for 24-hour access. The service now is supported by advertising that comes on the screen when users log on. The free service started Wednesday.

Eppley joins airports such as Kansas City International in offering Internet access at no cost to travelers. The Lincoln Airport still charges for the service.

Eppley Airfield contracted with Clear Channel/Interspace Airports to set up its free service.

When logging on, users also can find links to information such as which airline, car rental, taxi and shuttle companies serve Eppley, as well as contact information for the companies. Shop and restaurant listings for Eppley also are available.

Holman said if he doesn't want to pay for Internet access at an airport, he'll use his BlackBerry to check e-mails.

But for some tasks, he needs a larger screen and has to use the laptop. So free wireless service definitely is a plus, he said.

"I can open up and do much more with my laptop," Holman said.

Holman and others at Eppley on Wednesday didn't know that the airport was offering the free service. Several signs still advertised the old pay service.

Stan Kathol, finance director for the Omaha Airport Authority, said signs advertising the free service would be going up soon. The priority on Wednesday, he said, was making sure the new service was up and running.

"It's working very well, and we're making announcements on a regular basis and there will be more advertisements on it," Kathol said.

A few travelers said they still preferred to use their wireless Internet cards to get online.

They said they're already paying for the cards, so why not use them. Some also thought that the Internet security offered by their wireless provider was better.

Kathol said travelers using the airport's free service should have no worries. He said the service, also offered at a variety of other airports, is secure.

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