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HIGHLAND, IL – Now through Oct. 20, the city of Highland is offering technology-based startups a chance to win big.

The 2014 Highland Gigabit Challenge - the city's first - is a business plan competition offering more than \$40,000 in prizes to its winners. Highland's event partner is the Metro East Small Business Development Center.

To win, the company must locate in Highland. The first-place price is \$15,000. Prizes include startup funds, office space, Internet service and support via Highland's Entrepreneurship Program.

"We want to attract high-growth startups who are able to use and promote our city's state-of-the-art gigabit Internet service," said Lisa Peck, Highland spokeswoman. "We're one of a limited number of communities in the U.S. to have invested in the infrastructure necessary to support gigabit level Internet service."

For a city with less than 10,000 residents, it's a significant investment, Peck says.

"Highland recognizes the long-term value of the gigabit service as a tool to spur growth and innovation. For a city with a population of fewer than 10,000, we're one of a limited number of communities across the U.S. to make this investment," she said.

Patrick McKeehan, director of the Metro East SBDC, says the greater St. Louis region is rapidly gaining the reputation as a growing area for technology development.

"The business environment in the greater St. Louis area - including Highland - is particularly favorable for startups," McKeehan said. "Tech startups are able to take

advantage of the support is that readily available, including outstanding levels of support from the corporate community.”

The Highland Gigabit Challenge is sponsored by the St. Louis Regional Chamber, the Highland Chamber of Commerce, Corning, Bluebird Network, TheBANK of Edwardsville, RETKO Group, the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, Oates Associates, National Telco Television Consortium, First Clover Leaf Bank, Rotary Club of Highland, Terra Properties and Moran Economic Development.

Applications are being accepted through Oct. 20. Competition winners will be announced Dec. 12. To enter, go to <http://www.highlandcommunicationservices.com/gigabit-challenge.htm> or contact Peck at (618) 654-3592 or lpeck@highlandil.gov