

LAWRENCE, Mass. — City employees, some of whom three years ago were still using rotary phones and typewriters, are about to take a gigantic leap into the realm of technology.

Lawrence municipal workers will be the first in Massachusetts to use hand-held computers equipped by TotalMobile Inc., an Irish company with a new headquarters opening in Boston.

Thirty new devices, which bring desk top computer access and more on the road, are going to firefighters, building inspectors and other city workers who routinely work outside of the office gathering data.

The cell phone-sized devices allow employees to take pictures, enhance maps, prepare reports and send information right back to the city's main computer system, said Bryan Cahoon, the city's director of information technology.

The devices are a perfect fit for a building inspector evaluating property, a public health nurse making home visits or a city planner cataloging foreclosed homes and businesses, Cahoon said.

In the future, the same devices could be used by police officers, public health nurses and assessors.

No longer will those employees need to bring a clip board and paper, cell phone, camera, notepad and pen when they venture out into the city.

"Everything will be right there for them in this multi-functional device," Cahoon said.

In his three years working for the city, Cahoon is credited with drastically upgrading computer access for municipal workers.

Prior to his arrival, the city's computer system was extremely unsafe and seen as an international gateway for viruses and spam e-mail.

"Our IT department has taken City Hall from the Fred Flinstone days to the Bill Gates era overnight," said City Council President Patrick Blanchette.

The TotalMobile software will cost the city approximately \$100,000, money already earmarked in a city software and training budget. Officials say the expense will save the city in the long run, first and foremost, on paper. In a report earlier this year, state auditors cited excessive paper use as a major financial blunder for the city.

Also, becoming TotalMobile's first municipal customer in Massachusetts comes with perks. It allowed city leaders to negotiate a contract at reduced price and Lawrence will now be seen across the state as a technological front-runner.

"This hits on a major redevelopment theme for the city. We are not an old, bricks and mortar industrial city lost in the past. We are green-friendly and technologically capable," said City Planner Michael Sweeney, echoing Mayor Michael Sullivan's desire to make Lawrence known as a global community.

Reducing paper use is something Blanchette said he's long been committed to. Last spring, councilors were introduced to firms that would help them go paperless.

In the future, computer modules could be installed at seats in the city council chambers and meeting minutes would be electronically processed for the city clerk.

"We are still in the process of setting up some companies to come in and show us the most efficient and cost effective way possible to do this," Blanchette said.

He applauded the new devices, which he described as a positive step for the city. The council, along with the mayor, had the "foresight" to include these improvements in the capital planning budget, he said.

"I know we stand ready to support more technology advancements," Blanchette said.

TotalMobile Inc., based in Belfast, Ireland, offers a range of software that is designed to run on mobile devices. The products, aimed to improve efficiency and save money, are tailored for state and municipal governments, schools and public safety departments.

The company announced its intention to open a Boston office and create 40 new jobs late last month. Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray was thrilled with the company's expansion, noting it highlights a strong relationship between Massachusetts and Northern Ireland.