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## Austin tests desktop Linux waters

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By [Stephen Shankland](#)  
Staff Writer, CNET News.com

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**The city of Austin, Texas, is evaluating Linux and OpenOffice.org for desktop computers, the newest indication that open-source software has become a serious alternative to Microsoft products.**

The city is about three months into a "nonemotional Linux pilot" project to test the operating system for desktop computers and servers, Pete Collins, director of the city's communications and technology management department, said in an interview Friday. In addition, the city is testing [OpenOffice](#) on Windows.

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"I wanted to see for ourselves where we could leverage Linux to reduce our costs," Collins said. The city projects a \$39 million budget deficit for 2004, he said.

Linux has made inroads in cities such as [Munich, Germany](#), which is planning to have 14,000 desktops with the operating system. Microsoft Chief Executive Steve

Ballmer has labeled Linux and open-source software a [key competitive threat](#).

For the Linux desktop, Austin technicians are "just trying to make it actually function in our world," Collins said, but OpenOffice has made it further. It's running on about 30 Windows computers, including Collins' own, and he plans to expand the test to more sophisticated computer users soon.

"I forgot I was using it...everything I need to do I can do," Collins said, though he noted that he chiefly needs only basic features.

Austin has about 6,000 Windows computers, 5,200 of which are covered by a Microsoft enterprise software support agreement that expires at the end of 2004, Collins said. That agreement cost more than \$3 million.

It's likely that by using OpenOffice on his own department's computers, he will be able to move about 100 Microsoft Office licenses to other computer users who need it without having to pay extra, he said.

Microsoft argues that its products are worth paying for. "Microsoft is always willing to discuss how we can help bring the value of Microsoft products and services to the benefit of consumers and businesses alike. We will continue to work closely with Austin to explore how we can best meet their business needs," the company said in a statement.

Collins said he hasn't decided how to proceed and that Austin will use the Microsoft products it's already bought for as long as possible. "We are not throwing Microsoft out of the city of Austin," he emphasized.

At the same time, Austin likely won't renew the enterprise support agreement it signed with Microsoft that expires at the end of 2004, Collins said.

"I'm not happy with it," he said. "Will the city of Austin enter into a new enterprise agreement at the end of 2004 for 2005, 2006 and 2007? The answer is probably not."

The Microsoft agreement lets Austin upgrade its software whenever it wants, but Collins prefers to upgrade as infrequently as possible and would prefer an arrangement that provides for a fixed number of upgrades rather than any number of upgrades in a fixed period of time.

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Linux has been popular chiefly on servers, the networked systems that run around-the-clock chores such as e-mail delivery. More companies are angling for Linux on the desktop now, including a host of start-ups and several major companies.

"We are seeing surprising strength and interest in the Linux client area. That's an area we think will gain in the 2004 time frame," Red Hat Chief Executive Matthew Szulik said in a conference call Thursday after his company, the top Linux seller, reported **its most profitable quarter**.

Red Hat is joining IBM and an industry Linux consortium called the **Open Source Development Labs** to **boost Linux on the desktop**.

Hewlett-Packard is also evaluating the market, a source familiar with the company's plan said. But the most aggressive backer so far has been Sun Microsystems, a longtime Microsoft rival that began selling Linux desktop software called the **Java Desktop System** in December.

The Sun package includes Linux, the Mozilla Web browser, the StarOffice software suite and other components and costs \$50 per employee per year through June 30. Sun believes that customers in China will install **a half million copies of Java Desktop System** in 2004.

In an **open letter** Thursday, Sun's top software executive said it will sell the Java Desktop System at half of whatever price Microsoft offers a customer.

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