

S'pore start-up wins \$250m wireless deal in China

By BRYAN LEE

A LOCAL two-man start-up has hit the big time with its very first deal.

It has won a US\$150 million (S\$252 million) contract to build what could be China's largest network of wireless broadband hot spots.

NetPower International — set up early last year, and whose investors include the Economic Development Board (EDB) — said yesterday that it is rolling out the network for one of China's biggest telcos, Great Wall Broadband Network Service.

The project will cover 4,000 locations, such as hotels, commercial buildings and universities, across China's six biggest cities, beginning next month with the 60-storey World Trade Centre office block in Wuhan.

It will also pave the way for a

second deal, possibly worth another US\$100 million, to extend the network to another 2,000 to 3,000 hot spots — which are localised areas where Internet users can enjoy wireless broadband access — in smaller Chinese cities.

NetPower chief executive Alan Matthews, 56, said yesterday that the firm beat at least one American consortium for the deal, thanks to a self-developed software that makes it easier for wireless Internet users to roam across different networks.

With NetRoam, the firm's wireless roaming solution, he said wireless Internet users will be able to access any of Great Wall's hot spots in the country with just one user name and password. This should be a boon for tourists and business visitors as they need not bother with prepaid cards or remote Internet access providers such as iPass.

The contract is NetPower's maiden deal since it was set up by

Mr Matthews — who moved to Singapore from Australia 10 years ago — and Singaporean Mr Leonard Chong, 43. Investors have poured \$900,000 into the firm so far, with the EDB contributing a third of this through its \$80 million start-up financing fund, Seeds.

Both men previously worked together at Australian-based IT networking firm IntraPower, but a desire to ride the fast-growing Internet mobility wave led them down the path of entrepreneurship.

"We decided that wireless Internet was growing enormously and so we came up with a solution that did not require users to join iPass or buy prepaid cards, allowing them to roam easily across different hot-spot networks," Mr Matthews said.

NetPower is now looking to sell its solutions in Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia and the Philippines, and is also in talks with local player StarHub.

