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Towns connect to help create **WiredWest**

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A group of 22 towns in Western Massachusetts have formalized a cooperative effort to bring fiber-optic, high-speed Internet access to their rural communities.

It took more than a year to set up **WiredWest**, a cooperative entity that can issue municipal bonds to finance the project.

"It has been a long, complex endeavor to create the legal structure that allows multiple towns to work together as a cooperative," said Monica Webb, chairwoman of **WiredWest**. "We had to provide that structure for the cooperative to be able to offer Internet and telecommunications service in Massachusetts, and enable the co-op to finance the network using low-cost financing sources."

The issuance of low-cost municipal bonds are essential to the financing formula that will fund the installation of a fiber-optic network. The network is estimated to cost in excess of \$50 million.

Egremont, Great Barrington, Monterey, New Marlborough, Otis, Peru, Sandisfield, Washington and West Stockbridge are the Berkshire County towns participating in **WiredWest**.

In Franklin County, the member towns are Ashfield, Charlemont, Conway, Heath, New Salem, Rowe, Shutesbury, Warwick and Wendell. The cooperative includes the Hampshire County towns of Cumm-ington, Heath, Middlefield and Plainfield. The Hampden County town of Chester is also on board.

Eighteen other communities - including the Berkshire towns of Becket, Mount Washington, Savoy, Alford, Hinsdale and New Ashford - are going through the process to join, Webb said.

Now that the co-op has been established, she added, detailed engineering can begin, grants can be sought, and the financing effort can start.

WiredWest would need about 30 percent of its potential 30,000 subscribers for the effort to break even, according to Webb.

Nat Karns, director of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, has been involved in some of the preliminary meetings of town officials seeking to advance the effort.

"Technically this is doable," Karns said. "And I think this is one of the three or four critically strategic initiatives that can make a real transition of the economy of Western Massachusetts."

The toughest part is still ahead for the fledgling group, he added.

"The primary impediment is going to be finding the financing - it's the biggest stumbling block," he said. "But I think it's achievable. And these people have shown an incredible determination and have worked hard at it for several years. There is every likelihood they will succeed."

After the financing is secured, Webb said, the fiberoptic lines will be installed in member communities.

The system will link with the Internet trunk line being installed by the state to serve Western Massachusetts. An Internet service provider then will be contracted to provide the service over the new network. Homes and businesses would then subscribe to the service for a fee, which will hopefully generate enough revenue to pay down the debt and maintain the network.

Webb noted that a fiberoptic network is "future proof" because it provides so much speed and bandwidth, allowing it to carry voice, video and data to its customers. As such, it would be a boon to homes, home businesses and offices in rural and remote areas, allowing them to flourish where they hadn't had the capacity to before. Such a scenario could provide a significant boost to the economies of the member towns and the commercial zones nearby.

She said co-op officials are hoping to have at least part of the network operating in 2013. "The demand for what we're trying to do is overwhelming," said Steve Nelson, a member of the **WiredWest** executive committee representing the town of Washington. "People in these areas are desperate for high-speed Internet service."

The alternative to Wired-West is to let these areas languish while more populated areas continue to advance technologically and economically, he added. "Every day we're not doing this we're falling further and further behind," Nelson said. "We can't afford to do that because these areas will be economic dead zones."

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