

Communities left out in digital cold

Lack of broadband Internet access choking Berkshires' prosperity

By Trevor Jones
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For almost half of the Berkshires, "high-speed Internet" is an oxymoron, and it's draining the economic prosperity of the region, advocates say.

A 2009 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggests that the economies of rural towns benefit from high-speed access to the Internet. The study compared counties that had broadband access by 2000 to those without, and it concluded those with access had greater growth in employment and earnings over the past 10 years.

That news doesn't bode well for the six Berkshire County towns — Alford, Mount Washington, Peru, Savoy, Tyringham and Washington — that have no access to broadband service.

Thirteen other Berkshire communities — Becket, Cheshire, Egremont, Florida, Hancock, Hinsdale, Lanesborough, Monterey, New Marlborough, Otis, Sandisfield, West Stockbridge and Windsor — are considered to be "under-served" communities, because they have limited access to broadband.

"Lack of access is a real hurdle in the Berkshires and Western Massachusetts still," said state Sen.

Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield.

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute, the state's broadband advocacy group, last year applied for \$100 million in federal economic stimulus funds to bring high-speed wireless service to rural towns in Western Massachusetts, including 14 in Berkshire County. But the federal government rejected MBI's application in January.

MBI intends to apply for the second round of funding, which will be awarded this summer, according to MBI Director Judy Dumont. Dumont said the group plans to ask for less than \$100 million this time.

"Getting federal funding will allow us to build a robust network that the region needs and desires," Dumont said. "If we don't get federal funding, we'll have to do it all with our bond funding, which will make it more difficult to do. But we'll march on and continue to build."

MBI intends to use the federal funding to create a fiber-optic "middle mile" that would connect Internet anchor points — such as colleges, public schools, libraries and public safety centers — throughout the region.

Without access to high-speed wireless service, Downing said small-business owners in the area are unable to compete beyond their immediate market.

Even in areas with DSL — access to the Internet over a phone line — it's becoming a bottleneck because of more subscribers.

"We are hearing complaints from schools, from business people, and local residents that their DSL speeds are starting to be much slower," said Monica Webb, chairwoman of the Southern Berkshire Technology Committee.

Dianne Pearlman, executive director of the Berkshire Film and Media Commission, said broadband is essential for the film industry — like most other local industries — for it to be truly successful. The commission is a Great Barrington-based organization committed to networking for locals in the entertainment industry and bringing all levels of film production to the area.

"In this day and age, part of the way that we can really build the film and media industry is to connect with very high-end products to clients around the world," Pearlman said. "So it becomes imperative for us to be at the same level of the rest of the state and the rest of the U.S."

The impact can be felt beyond local businesses.

According to Downing, since there are a limited number of areas in the county with reliable bandwidth, the winnowing of businesses in under-served areas is affecting homeowners, too.

"[Property taxes] go up on the residential side because there is very little commercial revenue, if any, coming in at all in these smaller communities," he said.

Students also are falling behind

the technological curve. Teachers at some schools are limited in what they can assign for out-of-class work because of the limited access students have at home.

Meanwhile, a 2009 report by the state Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development shows a shrinking number of young educated people and decreases in median income between 1999 and 2006 for the county.

Dumont, the head of the Broadband Institute, said those are signs that companies can't recruit educated people to the area or keep home-grown educated individuals in the area.

"The businesses just aren't there for them to be employed in what their degree is in, so they're leaving the area," Dumont said.

That same report said broadband connectivity is the "single most important economic development priority for Berkshire County."

Comparing it to electricity,

indoor plumbing and the telephone, the report states that "it is impossible to understate the competitive disadvantage that people, businesses and municipalities confront in the absence of broadband Internet service."

Although the MBI's initial proposal for federal stimulus funds was rejected, the group did receive \$40 million in state bonds for broadband infrastructure in 2008. Of that sum, \$5 million has been spent on a 55-mile cable system along Interstate 91. The system is expected to be completed this summer.

Several Berkshire communities plan to place an article on their annual town meeting warrants this spring that will ask residents to consider having their towns join Wired West. A collection of broadband advocates in the four counties of Western Massachusetts, Wired West seeks to create a publicly owned, financially self-sustaining entity that would oversee connectivity to the "middle mile" system.



Downing