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Broadband entices Berkshire voters

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Sunday May 16, 2010 A group that is hoping to bring high-speed broadband access directly to home and businesses in the region's most rural areas is receiving plenty of support during town meeting season.

Voters in 27 Western Massachusetts municipalities, including 11 in Berkshire County, have given their elected officials permission to discuss joining **WiredWest**, said group spokeswoman Monica Webb of Monterey.

WiredWest was founded in February by a group of regional broadband advocates who decided to consolidate their efforts. The group is interested in extending a proposed fiber-optic ring that the Massachusetts Broadband Institute wants to construct around the four counties of Western Massachusetts.

To formalize membership in the organization, **WiredWest** needs to have an agreement from all interested communities. To that end, Wired West placed a nonbinding measure on the annual town meeting warrants in 45 communities.

According to Webb, voters have approved the measure in every municipality where it has been considered so far.

"It has been unanimous in every town as well," Webb said. "Given the economic climate today, we thought there would be a little more discussion.

"But it is a nonbinding measure," she said. "So there will be a more difficult decision for towns to consider down the road. This resolution [just] allows select boards to enter into discussions to form the organization."

Eleven of the 17 Berkshire towns that placed the measure on their annual town meeting warrants are located in South County, where three communities have no access to broadband and seven others have only limited access.

Voters in eight South County towns: Alford, Becket, Great Barrington, Mount Washington, Monterey, Sheffield, Tyringham and West Stockbridge have approved the measure. It has also been passed in Hancock, Savoy and Washington.

Voters in Florida, Hinsdale, New Marlborough, Peru, Otis, Sandisfield and Windsor have yet to consider the measure. The Egremont Board of Selectmen approved the measure without placing it on the annual town meeting warrant. It may also be approved by the Select Board in Lanesborough.

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