



## Worthington to take up Internet vote Tuesday

Tuesday, February 15, 2011

Worthington - Ryan Neuhauser cites one main reason why he's interested in bringing more high-speed Internet access to the area: "I have dialup," said Neuhauser, who lives on a hillside about three miles from the center of town. "Need I say more?"

As the local delegate to WiredWest, a multi-town effort to create a community-owned fiber-optic network offering speedy Internet access to all interested homes and businesses - including those on hard-to-reach hill-sides - Neuhauser is hoping for strong turnout at a special Town Meeting on the topic scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

At the meeting at Town Hall, voters will decide whether to form a municipal lighting plant, an administrative structure that is the first building block in setting up the network. Each of WiredWest's 47 charter towns must vote twice within 13 months by a two-thirds majority to create such a plant, which is essentially a new town department authorized to provide telecommunications services.

"It's like an inbox," said Neuhauser, a 35-year veteran of the engineering field who got involved with WiredWest a year ago. "WiredWest doesn't provide the Internet access itself, just the lines to get there."

The idea behind the co-op model, he said, is to make provision of high-speed Internet financially feasible in all parts of the rural Hilltowns. Neuhauser noted that while large companies such as Verizon have promised to provide DSL service - which is faster than dial-up but slower than broadband Internet - to his neighborhood, it still hasn't come through.

"The bottom line is there are seven people on my road," he said. "So there's no return on their money for doing it. WiredWest will use a different business model. They won't have shareholders to cater to."

The network is designed along the same lines as the rural electric cooperatives of the previous century, said Monica Webb, WiredWest's co-chairwoman. Annual membership fees in the co-op will be not more than \$1,000 for each town, and user fees will sustain the network over the long-term, though WiredWest is still developing a business plan for its operations.

Webb noted that Massachusetts created municipal light plant legislation more than 100 years ago to enable towns to provide electricity. The law was amended in the 1950s to allow for community TV and again in the 1990s for telecommunications services.

"A town could do their own network even without the legislation," Webb said. "But our investigations show you need around 15,000 (households) to have an economy of scale. So that's why it makes sense for towns to aggregate."

So far, 17 of the 47 WiredWest charter towns have already passed municipal light plant articles on the first vote, according to the organization's website. Others - including Worthington, Cummington, Monterey and New Marlborough - have items on the warrant. Cummington has scheduled its Town Meeting vote for Thursday.

When asked about President Barack Obama's new push to expand Internet access in underserved parts of the nation, Webb noted that leaders in Washington are talking about wireless technology, which is different from the fiber-optic network that WiredWest wants to set up. "Because of our topography, wireless is not a good technology, nor does it have the bandwidth that our businesses need to compete," she said.

WiredWest's organizing is also separate from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute's \$76.6 million effort to expand high-speed Internet access in the region, said Seth Isman of the Hilltown Community Development Corp., one of WiredWest's sponsoring agencies. While the Broadband Institute aims to build anchor Internet access points in each town, WiredWest is setting up a co-op to ensure that service gets from there to individual households and businesses.

"The reason I'm involved in this is that there are a lot of people out here whose businesses would work a lot better if they didn't have to rely on dial-up," said Isman, who is the CDC's director of economic development and a member of WiredWest's Finance Committee. "The idea that nowadays you can work from anywhere and communicate with everybody is only true if you have high-speed access."

Neuhauser couldn't agree more. "I got involved with WiredWest when I was unemployed and looking for a job," he said. "I got laid off after 35 years in engineering. I know I can't do business on the web with just dial-up."

For more information on WiredWest, visit <http://wired-west.net>.