

\$45 million U.S. grant lifts prospects of rural broadband for WMass

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The days of dial-up Internet service in remote areas of western Massachusetts may, finally, be numbered.

That's because the state is getting \$45.4 million in federal stimulus money to expand and improve high-speed Internet access in the western and north-central parts of the state, where officials say more than a million people live. The federal grant, along with \$26 million in state money, will be used to build the infrastructure needed to provide such service.

Residents in the underserved communities have lagged behind their counterparts in suburban and urban areas for years, a trend that advocates of the federal grant believe will be reversed when the network is complete in two to three years.

Proponents say it will make communications in the event of emergencies easier and faster; it will allow more people to work from home; and it will make it easier for colleges to recruit top-flight professors.

"I cannot overstate the value of this project for the communities of western and north-central Massachusetts that have gone without reliable high-speed broadband service for too long," Gov. Deval Patrick said in a statement Friday.

President Barack Obama awarded the grant to the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, a division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative that has been pushing for broadband access through an initiative called MassBroadband 123.

The project would construct some 1,100 miles of new fiber to serve 123 communities in western Massachusetts, with the potential to reach 1 million people and 44,000 businesses.

The network will connect to nearly 1,400 "anchors," including town halls, police and fire stations, hospitals, libraries and schools. That in turn will make it more economically viable for the private sector to come in and connect homes and businesses.

That's something U.S. Rep. John Olver, D-Amherst, said he is excited to see after a decade of work to bring broadband to the region.

"Countless residents and business owners who have been negatively impacted by their inability to access broadband have shared their frustrations with me," Olver said in a statement.

Officials estimate the project will create almost 3,000 jobs, about half from building and managing the network, the other half from economic development in the region.

"With this broadband technology expansion, the people who live in the 123 unconnected communities will see their quality of life dramatically improved, and their towns will finally bridge the digital divide," said U.S. Rep Richard E. Neal in a statement.

The region's other representatives in Congress also touted the initiative.

"This wasn't easy and it didn't happen overnight," Sen. John Kerry said in a press release. "I remember sitting with our state legislators and business leaders in 1998 talking about how to wire western Massachusetts for the future. Some people said it was a pipe dream, and now we've proven them dead wrong."

Earlier setback

Friday's announcement comes about four months after the federal government rejected MBI's earlier effort to secure \$100 million to bring broadband to underserved areas in the region.

Following that rejection, Peter d'Errico, a Leverett selectman, urged state representatives to "stir up" community involvement in the Hilltowns, because he knew that residents would be more willing to step up and help if they thought their voices were being heard at the state level.

"People in the Hilltowns are ticked off royally about this, and you can either harness that energy and use it, or be one of those who just gets trampled in the process," d'Errico said at a community forum held in Northampton.

MassBroadband 123 isn't the only effort to bring broadband to rural areas.

A movement known as WiredWest, which is made up of representatives from nearly 50 communities across the region, is aiming to build and operate a municipally owned fiber-optic network that provides broadband access to area residents, businesses and institutions.

"The state is building a robust, high-capacity, fiber-optic network to the center of every town," Monica Webb, WiredWest outreach chairwoman, told the Gazette in May. "It's like building a water main into the center of every town. You still need to get the water from the center of town out to all the individual residents and businesses, and that's where WiredWest comes in."

At the same time, the state is working on an initiative that would place wireless Internet equipment on fire towers operated by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. That plan is meant to augment the MassBroadband 123 initiative and will see antennas beam Internet service out to homes and business via radio wavelengths.

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