

## WiredWest works on 'last mile' for broadband access to Hilltowns, WMass

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In 2009, people from rural western Massachusetts towns came together to solve a vexing problem: How to get high-speed Internet access to their communities.

The result is WiredWest, comprising representatives from 47 towns working to build and operate a community-owned, open-access fiber-optic network that will bring broadband access to every home and business in participating towns.

WiredWest is not working alone. To do what residents of area Hilltowns have been clamoring for, it will work from bandwidth laid down by the Massachusetts Broadband Initiative. Using that key element, the organization aims to offer access to all homes and businesses in the more rural areas of western Massachusetts.

"If people want to pay for wireless they should be able to. We have a social justice focus" said Monica Webb, spokeswoman and member of the steering committee for WiredWest. "We have the vision that will enable new businesses, not just existing ones, to prosper. We are planning for the future. This takes time and money to create, but it will position our region with great economic opportunities in the long term."

Earlier this month, Massachusetts received \$45.5 million in federal stimulus funds to expand broadband access across the western part of the state. Using that money, the MassBroadband 123 Initiative will build a high-capacity, fiber-optic network in the center of each of the 123 unconnected and underconnected communities in the region. That grant covers the cost of what is known as "middle mile" coverage, which includes community anchor institutions like hospitals, libraries, town halls and municipalities, but does not include what is called "last mile" coverage to homes and smaller private businesses.

With the help of community broadband network consultant Andrew Cohill, WiredWest is looking to build that "last mile." Cohill, founder of Design Nine, a Virginia corporation that provides technology advice and services to community businesses, says some homes and businesses in western Massachusetts could have access before the end of 2011.

"There is no construction schedule yet. However, within the next three or four months, MBI will work out which towns will get construction first" said Cohill.

His firm is working with WiredWest in the first phases of financing and planning, which include choosing a suitable governance option and designing network architecture. Webb says WiredWest is eager to begin installing the network, but the broadband initiative's work is essential to the effort.

"We need the bandwidth that's going to be built from MBI's middle mile" said Webb, "It's like building a water main in the center of every town. We still need to get the water to all the individual residents and businesses."

The initiative will begin installing new bandwidth to the 55 miles of bandwidth "backbone" already established along Interstate 91. It will build out from there in three different rings, applying fiber to more than 35,000 existing poles around western Massachusetts.

"Installation isn't the hard part" says Jason Whittet, the broadband initiative's deputy director. "The engineering, design and permits are what is most difficult, but the project will be completed in a year and a half."

The positive impact of greater broadband access is well-documented. Numerous studies have shown a link between broadband expansion and economic development, including increased rates of business formation, job growth and property values.

"We want to ensure that the last mile' built will serve the needs of our community and look out for its interests. We want this to last into the future, and be financially self-sustaining as well as profitable for the communities," said Webb. "It is important we have a business model that doesn't become a burden."

In the next couple of months and throughout the fall, the broadband initiative will hold a series of regional and community meetings that will provide more information to local residents about the build out. The initiative also has plans to bring on a network operator to recruit last-mile providers this fall.

For more information on WiredWest and to see a map of the coverage areas, visit [www.wiredwest.net](http://www.wiredwest.net) [1].