

THE DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

Western Mass. challenge: broader internet access

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THE ISSUE: Much of western Massachusetts remains in the dark when it comes to access to broadband and wireless Internet service. The Hilltowns on both sides of the Connecticut River have had a particularly difficult time securing high-speed Internet access, with many residents in those communities relying on dial-up to reach the World Wide Web.

STORY SO FAR: In general terms, three separate efforts aim to bring high-speed Internet access to western Mass., two of which are state initiatives and one of which is a grassroots project.

The principal state initiative is known as MassBroadband 123 and is overseen by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, a division of the Massachusetts Technological Collaborative. The proposed program would build a 1,101-mile fiber-optic network across western Mass., bringing broadband Internet access to 123 communities. The project would cost a total of \$71.6 million, with \$45.4 coming in the form of federal stimulus funds and \$26.2 million coming from the state.

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. According to industry experts, wireless Internet can be installed more quickly than the fiber-optic cables needed for broadband, but is also limited in terms of the speed and amount of information that can be processed.

Finally, there is a grassroots initiative, known as WiredWest, which is made up of representatives from nearly 50 communities across western Mass. The group aims 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,” said Monica Webb, WiredWest outreach chairwoman. “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.”

Private telecommunications providers have not extended broadband service to rural areas of the state because the population is so widely dispersed, Webb said.

WHAT’S HAPPENING: The state’s broadband efforts hit a roadblock earlier this year when the federal government turned down the commonwealth’s \$100 million application to bring high-speed Internet to unserved areas of the state. The state has regrouped however, with the Massachusetts Broadband Institute applying for \$45.4 in federal stimulus funds to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Technological Collaborative and Department of Conservation and Recreation announced last week that they had signed an agreement that would allow the latter to place wireless equipment on DCR structures.

At the local level, WiredWest is sponsoring a town meeting warrant article that gives towns permission to enter into talks to create a municipal broadband network. A total of 45 towns are set to consider the article. As of Friday, 27 towns had approved the article, according to the WiredWest website.

VERBATIM: “The philosophy behind a municipal network at this point in time is that high-speed Internet service has become fundamental infrastructure for the operations of businesses, government, education, health care and public safety.”- Monica Webb, WiredWest

WHAT’S AHEAD: An announcement on the state’s application for \$45.4 million in stimulus funds is expected next month. Locally, there are 18 towns left to consider the WiredWest warrant article. Once those votes are tallied, the organization can begin talks on formalizing the relationship between towns and WiredWest and can start discussions on the logistics of creating a municipal broadband network.

RESOURCES: The Massachusetts Broadband Institute provides information about its efforts to boost broadband access at its website: www.massbroadband.org. Information about WiredWest: <http://wired-west.net>

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Issue Tracker is a Monday feature. To suggest issues, call Phoebe Mitchell at 585-5249 or email her at pmitchell@gazettenet.com.