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New approach for getting broadband

By RICHIE DAVIS, Recorder Staff

Annual town meetings in 16 Franklin County towns may be wired this year. At least, voters will be considering ways of connecting their towns to high-speed telecommunication .

These are among the 47 western Massachusetts towns with “Wired West” warrant articles, to consider becoming part of an effort to bring broadband to all parts of their communities.

Shelburne and Conway have already unanimously approved the articles, and informational sessions are planned in coming days in four other area towns: tonight at 6:30 in Heath Community Hall, Tuesday at 7 p.m. at Colrain Central School and at 6:30 p.m. in the Hawley Town Offices; and Thursday at 7 p.m. in Ashfield Town Hall.

The warrant articles in those towns — also in Charlemont, Rowe, Buckland, Leverett, Leyden, New Salem, Northfield, Shutesbury Warwick and Wendell — involve no spending, emphasized David Greenberg, WiredWest Committee chair. Instead, they would allow the towns to enter into an inter-municipal agreement to establish “a universal, open access, financially self-sustaining communication system” to provide high-speed Internet access, telephone and cable television to the residents, businesses and other institutions.

The community-owned effort would develop networks in the towns themselves, plugging into the state’s efforts to build a set of fiber-optic rings around all of western Massachusetts — 1,338 miles in all, including 1,016 of new fiber.

Both the grassroots initiative and Massachusetts Broadband Institute’s effort, for which the state has applied for \$45 million in federal stimulus money, matched with \$26.2 million from in state bond funding, would be “pieces of an overall puzzle,” said MBI Executive Director Judith Dumont. “They’re very complementary. Our philosophies are aligned.”

Greenberg, whose looseknit group from towns either unserved or underserved by cable and high-speed telephone lines began meeting two months ago, said, “western Massachusetts is dead in the water if we don’t get this sooner instead of later. So we decided we were going to try to make this happen.”

The exact technology, ownership, management and financing of “this” is yet to be determined, but the group of volunteers is looking at municipal fiber project models in different parts of the country, including the still-to-be-built 22-town East Central Vermont Community Fiber Network.

“This group is going to explore how to bring fiber to the home in all our unserved and under-served towns,” said Greenberg. The Internet is not a luxury any more. It’s like a utility.”

If the state gets its federal funding to build fiber rings and link to 1,392 “anchor” community colleges, schools, hospitals, public safety facilities around the region, he said, “That will make life a lot simpler.”

MBI, which was rejected in an earlier round of stimulus funding, expects to hear about the federal funding sometime between June and September and would be required to have most of its network built within two years. Dumont said that with 350 applications in — 90 more than in the round when MBI’s first, 100 million bid was rejected, the state faces a “highly, highly competitive process.

WiredWest, which Greenberg said will probably organize formally sometime this summer, depending on the outcome of the articles in the communities, can help bridge the gap between the state’s “middle mile” fiber-optic lines and private companies that have been slow to build in sparsely populated areas.

“We don’t think there’s anyone in the private sector who’s interested in actually doing the build-out of last mile,” Greenberg said. “There are a significant number of providers who want to provide services once a network is built. But we know they’re not interested in really low density kind of places where they can’t make a decent return on investment. WiredWest is not interested in making money; We’re interested in getting broadband to all of our towns.” With the Federal Communications Commission considering a National Broadband Plan to encourage development of high-speed communications just as the Rural Electrification did in the 1930s, Greenberg said, WiredWest hopes to look at ways of getting funding to build an open-access network to serve homes and businesses in even the most remote reaches of its participating towns, with private firms probably providing the service.

“We just want to have a financial model in place that doesn’t require the towns to raise taxes and will allow us to pay back the loans over a reasonable amount of time,” he said. “Clearly if nobody does anything, it’s not going to happen.”

On the Web: <http://wired-west.net> You can reach Richie Davis at rdavis@recorder.com or (413) 772-0261 Ext. 269