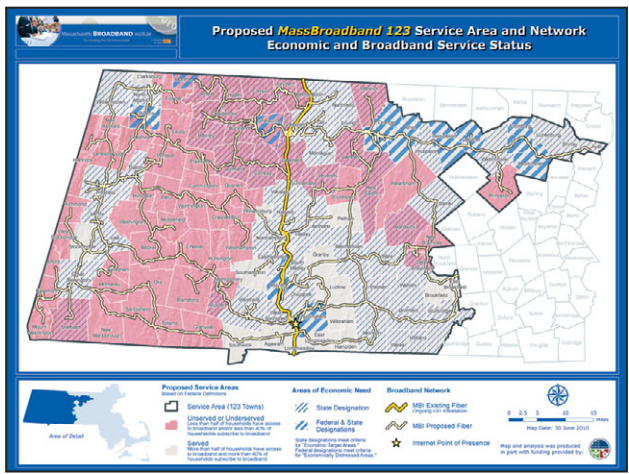


# Broadband coverage closer to reality

By RICHIE DAVIS  
Recorder Staff

A major milestone in the 12-year effort to bring broadband to rural Franklin County was marked Friday by a \$45.5 million award of federal stimulus funding to build a series of fiber-optic rings throughout western Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute won the funding as a step toward providing broadband technology to 123 under-served or unconnected towns with 1,100 miles of new fiber-optic cable that will reach within three miles of where 98 percent of the homes and businesses in western



map courtesy of Massachusetts Broadband Institute

Massachusetts, said MBI Director Judith Dumont. It covers more than one-third of the state.

"We now have the money to build the much needed broadband-infra-

structure that will allow businesses, residents and 1,400 anchor institutions — hospitals, libraries, community col-

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leges and public safety — to connect to a robust network for the 21st century," Dumont said.

The new network, which is required to become entirely functional within three years and 67 percent operational within two years, also makes use of leased lines connecting between eastern and western Massachusetts.

The fiber network — which includes recently installed fiber along the length of Interstate 91 in Massachusetts — would provide the "middle mile" between major trunk lines and local systems that will actually connect with people's homes and businesses.

Without the public investment, she said, the rate of return for private investors to provide service in this region would have been well over 30 years, and as long as 100 years, Dumont estimated.

The federal stimulus funding will be matched by \$26.2 million in state funding to build the publicly owned, open access network serving an area that includes 22 communities in north central Massachusetts.

"This is a huge step," said Linda Dunlavy, co-director of Western Massachusetts Connect, who has been spearheading the Franklin County effort to bring broadband to the region for a dozen years. Although fiber-optic cable already cuts through the region — some of it as part of a National Grid high-speed network — she explained, "There's no way to access it. This literally has thousands of locations to get on or off, and that's huge."

Monica Webb, a spokeswoman for a new 47-town, grass-roots "WiredWest" initiative to create a locally-owned, universal access broadband network throughout its western Massachusetts communities, said of the stimulus funding, "It's certainly great news. This is considered the critical piece that lays the groundwork in the center of every town and in community anchor institutions. But it doesn't hook up homes and businesses, and that's where WiredWest comes in."

Even with the network being created by MBI, which is helping the grass-roots group get started, Webb believes the odds are "slim to none" that private companies will offer to provide an entire, sparsely populated community with fiber-optic service.

Once service providers do hook up with the new fiber over the next three years, users should be ready and waiting.

Paul Hake, a multi-media designer and developer who was forced to move his production company from Greenfield's Main Street to Hatfield because there's no

commercially available fiber-optic service to keep up with the speeds necessary to run his business, said the high-tech infrastructure is strongly needed.

"We were at the fastest Internet speeds I could get, but it was very slow compared to other places," said Hake, who was operating Paul Hake Productions in Greenfield with a much slower Digital Subscriber Line. "It's three to four times faster to upload files over fiber-optic lines versus what we were able to get in Greenfield as a highest speed. If we're uploading at 70,000 bytes per second and we have these things that are gigs and gigs of file size, it can take days, sometimes, to upload things, whereas over fiber-optic cable it can take one-third of that time or even a matter of hours."

Richard Roth, who operates a Greenfield-based Web development firm and is on the board of Hidden Tech, an organization of Pioneer Valley technology-based businesses, said, "This really does make a difference for a lot of business initiatives that otherwise wouldn't happen, because people just don't have an easy way to do it. It's a pretty constant issue."

In Buckland, Michael Garfield-Wright's company, Dancing Star LLC, wrestles with lack of dependable high-speed service as it distributes organic energy bars all over the country, from small independent stores to Whole Foods Market.

"I'm dealing with the lead buyers of some huge companies, and the ability to communicate is really important," he said. He had to run his business out of the library in December 2008 when an ice storm knocked out power, and Internet access, for eight days.

And in Wendell, Town Coordinator Nancy Aldrich agreed that working without broadband access can be frustrating.

The accountant for the town of 900 can't even work out of the town hall because of the poor Internet access, she said. Town employees can't watch training videos or participate in webinars, and can't access critical documents.

"Sometimes someone sends me a large document, like a contract, and it simply won't open," she said.

The 3,429-square-mile "MassBroadband 123" service area includes more than one million residents, over 44,000 businesses and at least 2,100 community anchor institutions. Officials estimate it will create almost 3,000 jobs, about half from building and managing the network, the other half from economic development in

the region.

MBI had its other application for stimulus funding — \$100 million as part of a first round for broadband projects — rejected earlier this year. That proposal was revised by MBI, which was created with a \$40 million in state bond funding under the Massachusetts Broadband Act.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Material from the Associated Press was used in preparing this report.)