

WiredWest intends to bring broadband to your door

by Tony Dobrowolski

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PITTSFIELD -- Town meeting voters in several Berkshire communities are being asked to back a group whose goal is to bring high-speed broadband access directly to homes and businesses in the region.

The group, known as WiredWest, has placed the measure on the annual town meeting warrants in 45 Western Massachusetts communities, including 17 in Berkshire County. Eleven of the Berkshire towns are in South County, where three communities have no access to broadband, and seven others have limited access.

To formalize membership in its organization, WiredWest needs to have a formal agreement between all interested communities.

The measure, which is nonbinding, asks voters to allow their elected officials to craft an "inter-municipal agreement" that would determine the parameters under which WiredWest would operate, according to the organization's spokesperson, Monica Webb of Monterey.

"It directs the [boards of selectmen] to enter into discussions to form the organization," said Webb, who also chairs the Southern Berkshire Technology Collaborative. "At the end of the town meeting season, all the towns who have voted to join will decide what the legal entity is, and the exact terms of the inter-municipal agreement."

WiredWest was founded in February by a group of regional broadband advocates who decided to consolidate their efforts. At this point, the group is an informal community organization whose mission is to design, build and operate an open-access, community-owned fiber optic network in its participating towns, Webb said.

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute has applied for \$45.4 million in federal economic stimulus funds to construct a broadband infrastructure network, or fiber-optic ring, around the four counties of Western Massachusetts. WiredWest wants is to extend that network to individual residences and businesses, Webb said.

"The MBI's proposal is to bring high-capacity fiber into the center of every town," she said. "We would extend connectivity from the center of every town to individual homes and businesses."

"I view it as a complimentary piece to the entire puzzle," said MBI Director Judith Dumont.

Webb said WiredWest has hired a well-known broadband consultant from Virginia who is working with the group to identify funding sources.

"He's going to be working very closely with us to decide what the best business model is with the ultimate goal of obtaining financing," she said. "There are a number of options including public and private sources that we may leverage at this point. We don't know what it will be. We want it to collectively be decided by the towns."

In anticipation of the annual town meetings, WiredWest has been holding information sessions in various communities throughout the region. In Berkshire County, meetings are scheduled for 4 p.m. Friday at the Berkshire South Regional Community Center in Great Barrington, and 10 a.m. Saturday at the Town Hall in New Marlborough and at the Nessacus Regional Middle School in Dalton.

"We really want people to understand the importance of broadband to individual communities," Webb said.

Although a majority of Western Massachusetts communities have placed the measure on their town meeting warrants, the boards of selectmen in three other towns, including Egremont, have already approved it. The measure is also scheduled for approval by the selectmen in Hancock and Lanesborough.