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\$71.6M coming to aid broadband expansion

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PITTSFIELD -- Berkshire County, meet broadband.

After some false starts and legislative disappointment, the county is one step closer to a new world of online opportunities, as federal and state officials announced that \$71.6 million would go toward broadband expansion throughout Western Massachusetts.

"This wasn't easy and it didn't happen overnight," said U.S. Sen. John Kerry in a statement. "I remember sitting with our state legislators and business leaders in 1998 talking about how to wire Western Massachusetts for the future. Some people said it was a pipe dream, and now we've proven them dead wrong. ... I couldn't be happier. This is history making."

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute, which has spearheaded efforts to bring broadband to 123 unconnected or underserved towns throughout Western Massachusetts, will be receiving \$45.5 million in stimulus funds to create what industry insiders call "the middle mile network" -- a direct connection to a speedy new fiber optic network for 1,392 schools, public safety facilities, hospitals and libraries across the state.

MBI had previously applied for \$100 million in stimulus funds, but their proposal was rejected in January.

Currently, 13 Berkshire County towns -- Windsor, Savoy, Florida, Peru, Washington, Becket, Tyringham, Sandisfield, New Marlborough, Mount Washington, Alford, Hancock and New Ashford -- have no

broadband access, while another 10 only have "limited" access to broadband.

A completed broadband infrastructure would allow greater bandwidth for Internet, television and telephone services, allowing for resource-heavy applications such as telemedicine, video conferencing and home security.

"For those who are stuck on dial-up or satellite, this is going to be a real sea change," said David Greenberg of the nonprofit WiredWest, which has been working on connecting residents to broadband. "If we can get people to go on those networks, it's going to be a real revolution."

In addition to the federal funding, Gov. Deval Patrick's administration will add on \$26.2 million in matching state funds. MBI's initiative -- called MassBroadband 123 -- will create nearly 3,000 jobs and eventually impact 44,000 businesses across the commonwealth.

"Expanding broadband access has been at the forefront of our economic development agenda since Day One," Patrick said in a statement. "[We] look forward to putting these funds to work immediately so that businesses, hospitals, classrooms and households of Western Massachusetts can connect to and take an active part in a 21st century economy."

That said, the coverage is not universal. While the initiative does not connect homes and businesses to broadband yet, the network will make the efforts of groups such as WiredWest dramatically simpler to create "the last mile" of localized broadband infrastructure.

"In terms of what WiredWest wants to do, that [broadband initiative] takes care of half of the job for us," said spokeswoman Monica Webber, who estimated that homes and businesses would be linked to the broadband network within two to five years. "Our idea is we're going to extend that fiber connectivity to businesses -- that's the only way they will get superior service to what many businesses have today."

"This means people are going to be able to keep up with the rest of the world -- we're falling behind in terms of education and economic development," Greenberg said. "Everything is delivered via the Internet ... we'll be able to do anything they can do in Tokyo and South Korea, where they have this kind of stuff now."