

Editorial: State should clear air about broadband money



Cables connecting phone, cable and Internet service come out of a wall connector in this photograph taken last year. The Baker administration continues its review of plans and money for the "last mile" broadband effort. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)

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The Baker administration should clear the air regarding its plans for "last mile" broadband Internet money. Doing so would clear uncertainty that now exists for WiredWest's effort to bring Internet to the county's smaller towns.

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The state earlier this year ordered a review of the effort for expanding broadband service to communities with little or no Internet service to homes and businesses. Although the state said there was no change in the availability of money, the review, conducted by the Massachusetts Office of Administration and Finance, was to ensure funding wasn't wasted. A recent letter to legislators and town officials from the state's Massachusetts Broadband Institute and administration fell short of explaining clearly the current status.

The state through MBI did reiterate its desire to "develop and execute a strategy that will provide broadband access to the greatest number of residents possible, access available sources of financing and offer the best value for the public investment."

MBI will move forward with the expansion for communities with a limited broadband infrastructure through cable companies. The state wants to offer financial enticements, \$5 million of the \$50 million available, for these cable providers to enlarge their existing structure.

That's good news.

Where cable doesn't exist, the state is much less clear on what's happening. This includes WiredWest's large multitown cooperative that has been enrolling towns in Berkshire, Hampshire and Franklin counties. The collaborative and MBI have been for several months engaged in talks over WiredWest's organizational blueprint, including its financing. At stake in these negotiations have been the millions of "final mile" dollars that WiredWest would get.

The letter does say, "The MBI will continue to proceed with projects where cost-effective and sustainable solutions are identified and access to financing is assured." But that seems to leave WiredWest and the towns that have agreed to be part of the cooperative hanging in the wind. While WiredWest continues to move forward with its plans, the state's silence here allows uncertainty to enter into the picture. That's a disservice to WiredWest and the towns that see the cooperative as the best answer for providing a high-speed Internet network.

Massachusetts residents don't want to see their tax dollars wasted any more than does the Baker administration. But if the state sees WiredWest's approach as problematic, it should clearly explain why and then explain what can be done to reinvigorate the effort to provide this essential connection to the taxpayers of western Mass.

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