

The Berkshire Eagle



Residents to vote on WiredWest

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Updated: 02/09/2011 12:06:03 PM EST

Wednesday February 9, 2011

GREAT BARRINGTON -- Before the main event at tonight's Special Town Meeting, voters will be asked to take the first step toward joining WiredWest, a cooperative venture involving nearly 50 towns in western Massachusetts designed to bring state-of-the-art Internet access to underserved communities.

If Great Barrington's membership is approved by the required two-thirds majority, a second, final vote will be taken at the annual Town Meeting on May 2.

According to WiredWest, 20 of Berkshire County's 32 communities are underserved by broadband Internet providers. While 18 have partial coverage, Tyringham and Mount Washington are completely unserved, said Monica Webb, co-chairman and spokesman for the organization.

She explained that while Great Barrington is fully covered by Time Warner Cable broadband service, advanced, fiber-optic connectivity is a high priority for businesses as well as for Simon's Rock College and the Berkshire Hills Regional school system. "It's a critical tool in order for the town to compete in the state, nation and the world," she said.

Webb cited evidence that businesses considering relocating to the town first examine the availability of skilled labor, and then check for fiber-optic, high-bandwidth Internet access.

"We've heard that large companies looking to open a major facility pack their bags and leave when they don't find enough bandwidth," she said. "They're looking to their needs five years from now."

With more employees working part-time at home, she added, there's a need for file-sharing, high-definition teleconferencing and "cloud computing," which permits staffers at home to access a company's network for data-sharing.

WiredWest is designed to connect to the Massachusetts Broadband Initiative's main Internet pipeline and then provide the "last mile" of service to homes, schools and businesses from key portals such as Town Hall, police and fire stations, and libraries. Massachusetts Broadband Initiative, or MBI, is handling the "middle mile," which Webb compared to "bringing in a giant water main into western Massachusetts with an end point in every town." About 98 percent of the region's residents live within 3 miles of those portals.

MBI's 1,300 miles of fiber-optic connections in the region are expected to be completed by 2013. The \$71.6 million project is supported by \$45 million in Federal stimulus aid, plus \$26 million in matching state funds.

WiredWest would seek federal low-interest loans and grants, private local investors and municipal bonding shared by the member towns.

Once the nonprofit system is up and running, it is designed to be financially self-sustaining, with no ongoing investment spending. "It would run as a municipal utility, as lean as possible," Webb said. "It's for the common good."

While the individual hookups would require several more years to be completed, Webb compared the complex initiative to rural electrification in the 1930s and the development of the interstate highway system in the 1950s.

"We want to build an infrastructure as a long-term investment that would last for decades, to catch us up to where the rest of the world was five years ago," she said.

While a favorable vote tonight does not commit the town to anything, the second vote on May 2 would create a so-called municipal light-plant department, an archaic-sounding mechanism for moving forward with the project.

Four Berkshire towns have given final approval to membership -- Egremont, West Stockbridge, Washington and Otis -- as well as 12 others in the region.

Fifteen additional Berkshire towns have voted "yes" on the first of the two required ballots.