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Broadband's backbone

Editorial

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The awarding of a \$45.4 million in federal stimulus funds toward construction of a fiber-optic network serving North Central and Western Massachusetts is good news for the rural Berkshire County communities still awaiting 21st century Internet and telephone services. Making the necessary connections from this "backbone" network will constitute the next important step in the process.

State funds will pay for the remainder of the \$71.6 million project, which is designed to serve 123 communities. The network will be a "shot in the arm to this region's economy," according to U.S. Senator John Kerry, who attended the announcement of the funding grant in Greenfield by U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke. Senator Kerry has been a vigorous advocate for the Massachusetts Broadband Initiative's efforts to expand service in Western Massachusetts.

The state-sponsored MBI will now begin the process of determining how to best link this 1,000 miles of new fiber that constitutes the backbone to the schools, town halls, police and fire departments, businesses and homes in this wide region. A number of small Internet providers have expressed interest, including WiredWest, a group of regional broadband advocates who found considerable interest in their efforts at Berkshire town meetings in May. The big Internet providers have responded cautiously as they gauge profitability.

The unserved and underserved towns of the Berkshires need better connections

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poised to leap into a new era.

to police and fire departments, and broadband will attract more small businesses and freelancers to rural towns which are good places in which to live if you can also make a living. With funding for the backbone to be followed by links to it, these towns are