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Broadband: The next step Western Mass. towns without service ready to build a network

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PITTSFIELD - Every town that offered voters the option of taking part in a Western Massachusetts **broadband** initiative approved the idea, sending advocates into the next stage of development.

The next step is to form a non-profit to plan and build a fiber optic network in all the region's unserved or underserved towns.

And with all 47 towns on board, the real work begins in earnest, with no delay.

"A lot of people have been waiting years for this so we wanted to get started right away," said Monica Webb, spokesperson for WiredWest Communications, the latest incarnation of the decade-old movement.

On Friday, the day after the final two towns had voted to join the effort, the steering committee was meeting with a consultant to talk about how to form the non-profit agency, and what lies ahead. Today, they are meeting with representatives from each town to answer questions and share the options under consideration.

Among more significant questions facing the effort is how to finance the project, which will cost millions of dollars.

Once installed, the fiber optic network will lease access to a number of providers of services like Internet, television, telephone, telehealth, distance learning and energy management to offer their products to users of the network. Without replacing the fiber optic cable, its bandwidth is expandable. And its lifespan is anticipated to easily exceed 30 years.

Because the agency is a non-profit, and due to increased competition among the service providers, officials expect users to pay between 25 and 50 percent less for the same services they might have had via cable or DSL.

Full build-out of the network is expected to take three to five years, with the first connections possible in late 2011.

"This wasn't a hard sell," noted David Greenberg, chairman of the WiredWest steering committee. "It's pretty much a no-brainer - economic development is the driving force. Without this major initiative, Western Mass is going to be sinking fast."

A sample of fiber optic cable is shown by Andrew Michael Cohill, president of Design Nine, a consultant firm working with WiredWest to wire Western Massachusetts for high-speed Internet access.

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