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Wiring the West

With **WiredWest** now formally up and running, the process of providing high-speed Internet access to all of rural Berkshire County has taken an important step. There are obstacles ahead, but this is a project that must succeed for the Berkshires to succeed economically, arrest its population drain and attract new businesses and residents.

In an opinion piece in Tuesday's Eagle, state Representative William "Smitty" Pignatelli of Lenox wrote that while last month's beginning of a project to construct a fiber-optic network connecting public buildings in rural Berkshire County is significant, the effort will fall short unless the "last-mile" connection is made to individual homes and businesses. This will be costly and expensive, and Representative Pignatelli argues that not enough focus has been placed on this last mile.

WiredWest is poised to play a key role in making this last-mile connection. A cooperative effort among 22 communities, nine of which are in the Berkshires, with six other county communities in the process of joining. The plan is to link up with the fiber-optic trunk line being installed by the state and contract with a service provider to connect with homes and businesses.

Financing will be the key, and **WiredWest** is able to issue municipal bonds to finance the project. Assuming that financing can be found through bonds and grant money, about 30 percent of the potential 30,000 subscribers in the member towns would have to subscribe to the Internet service for it to pay off its debt and sustain itself. Given the many benefits of high-speed service and the increasing demand for it, it would seem that far more than 30 percent of rural Western Massachusetts residents would join.

If rural residents want to enhance the education of their children and/or work at home, high speed Internet is a necessity. It is a necessity for any small businesses that are not dependent on road networks and want to root themselves in a small community. This has to happen, and while traveling the last mile will not be easy, **WiredWest** is poised to start down it.

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