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US grant to spread Net access

\$45.4m aids effort for Western Mass.

By Hiawatha Bray

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The federal government will pay \$45.4 million to help bring high-speed Internet service to about 1 million underserved residents of Western Massachusetts.

“This is huge,” said state Senator Stan Rosenberg, an Amherst Democrat and president pro tem of the state Senate. Rosenberg said that the new network will help revitalize the economy of his district in the western part of the state, where many consumers and businesses now have little or no access to broadband connections.

The federal grant will be awarded to the Massachusetts Technology Park Corp., an independent authority that promotes the state’s technology industry. The agency applied for the money earlier this year, and Governor Deval Patrick pledged to match it with an additional \$26.2 million in funding, bringing the total budget for the project to \$71.6 million.

The money will be used to lay 1,300 miles of high-speed optical fiber to form a backbone network serving 123 Western Massachusetts communities. It will connect directly to hundreds of government agencies, including schools, libraries, and police and fire departments, but will not deliver Internet services directly to homes and businesses. Instead, commercial or municipal Internet providers will be able to connect to the backbone and run their own services to retail consumers.

“Expanding broadband access has been at the forefront of our economic development agenda since Day One,” Patrick said in a statement. “I cannot overstate the value of this project for the communities of western and north central Massachusetts that have gone without reliable, high-speed broadband service for too long.”

Rosenberg said that at least 25 Western Massachusetts towns now have virtually no broadband Internet service. Many more have very limited service, and in some towns, the telephone networks are so old and decayed that even dial-up Internet access is hard to come by.

“People are having to shut down businesses because they can’t get access to broadband Internet,” Rosenberg said. “They’re having to sell their homes and move to other places.”

With the new fiber network, “our citizens, our businesses, our students, our government, will all be able to participate in the 21st century economy,” said Monica Webb, spokeswoman for WiredWest, a consortium of 47 towns working to bring broadband to the region.

WiredWest plans to build a municipal network to homes and businesses once the fiber optic backbone is complete. “The communities will own the network,” said Webb.

The network would be open, meaning that any broadcaster could lease access and use it to deliver phone, video, or Internet services to customers.

Along with the Massachusetts funding, the Obama administration is issuing 66 broadband development grants across the United States, for a total of \$795 million. The money will come from the economic stimulus plan enacted last year, which set aside \$7.2 billion in grants and loans to upgrade the nation’s data networks.

About \$2.7 billion of the money has been allocated to date, including the most recent grants.

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