

Leverett, Worthington give nod to local broadband

By BEN STORROW
Staff Writer

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LEVERETT - The slow march toward gaining high-speed Internet access in rural western Massachusetts continued Tuesday night, as voters in both Leverett and Worthington lent their overwhelming support to a measure that would allow each town to take preliminary steps in creating a local broadband Internet network.

Those votes came in a pair of separate special Town Meetings and seemed to reflect a growing sense of determination by municipalities to find their own solution to the broadband quandary. Residents in both towns have long heard promises from state government and private companies, who claimed they would provide high-speed Internet service to people there. But such promises have thus far gone unanswered, with the Massachusetts Broadband Institute rating both towns as underserved or unserved by high-speed Internet providers.

The proposal in both towns was the same and crafted by a regional organization known as WiredWest, a consortium of 47 western Massachusetts towns seeking to create a regional broadband Internet network. The warrant article before voters in both towns Tuesday called for the establishment of what essentially is a municipal utility company. Under state law, municipal utilities are allowed to form telecommunication divisions, which can oversee the establishment and maintenance of a broadband Internet network.

By establishing such a utility, municipalities can then assume the costs and maintenance of building a broadband network on their own or in concert with other towns, as WiredWest proposes to do. Leverett is considering the possibility of building such a network on its own or in cooperation with WiredWest.

Peter d'Errico, a Leverett selectman, told the gathering in his town that for Leverett to proceed with either option, they needed to pass the warrant item in question Tuesday.

"The point of this article is to establish the institutional framework to move forward," d'Errico said. "The alternative is to do nothing tonight and sit on our hands, waiting for a private company to come in and do something."

Leverett voters passed the WiredWest proposal unanimously while Worthington voters passed it by a 72-5 margin.

WiredWest's goal is to complete what is known as the "last mile" in the telecommunications industry, stringing the fiber-optic cable needed for broadband Internet from central access points to consumers' homes in the 47 communities it serves. The Massachusetts Broadband Institute, the state entity charged with expanding high-speed Internet service, is working on a \$71.4 million project to complete the "middle mile," establishing broadband access points in 123 western Massachusetts municipalities.

