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New effort to bring broadband to small towns

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With 47 towns around western Massachusetts joining in a new grass-roots, high-speed telecommunication effort, the WiredWest consortium is now looking at how to form a legal entity that can seek

funding and enter into contracts to build and operate a broadband network to serve homes and businesses.

WiredWest, with 16 participating Franklin County towns, is working with Virginia-based broadband consultant Andrew Cohill on a six-month design of what would be a

community-owned and open access network.

Cohill's work will include assessing the region's needs and analyzing its demography and bandwidth needs, as well as recommending governance and ownership and developing a business plan, future funding strategies and more.

Meanwhile, the state's application for \$45.4 million in federal stimulus funding to build a fiber-optic ring to make high-speed telecommunication accessible to even the state's most remote corners is entering its last phase of "due diligence" review by the state. While WiredWest steering committee

members say that could help them in building "a universal, open-access, fiber-to-the-home network that is financially self-sustaining and community-owned," they say it isn't necessary for them to proceed.

So far, in addition to receiving

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support from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute as well as \$27,000 in funding from the Franklin and Berkshire regional planning agencies to map utility poles and homes and to provide access to a lawyer to help address any regulatory issues, the consortium is also planning discussions with private service providers to see if they can work together to

serve unserved and underserved communities in the four counties.

"Everybody wants fiber yesterday," said steering committee member Monica Webb. "We're fast-tracking this as fast as we can."

On the Web: <http://wired-west.net>

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