



Rep. Stephen Kulik

# Legislative View Point

By Rep. Stephen Kulik (D-Worthington), First Franklin District

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During the month of May our nation celebrates Older American's Month, and each year since 1963 there is a different theme that helps us focus on an issue of importance to seniors.

The theme of this year's celebration is: Older Americans: Connecting the Community and it pays tribute to the many ways in which older adults bring inspiration and continuity to the fabric of our communities. It also highlights the many ways technology is helping older Americans live longer, healthier and more engaged lives.

Here in Franklin County, this brings to mind our efforts to bring high-speed broadband service to the many communities and thousands of people who do not have access to it now. And while many people may think of the internet as technology primarily suited to young people, nothing could be further from the truth. National studies have shown that the fastest growing segment of internet users are senior citizens. This trend is no different in our rural Franklin County towns, where seniors use (or want to use) the internet for keeping in touch with friends and family, getting news and information, helping to manage their health care, and for shopping and entertainment. In fact, many of our area Councils on Aging keep in touch with people via email, and some seniors are even receiving The Good Life electronically over the internet.

The value of high-speed internet service to seniors is enormous, but the fact that many in our region do not have access is a major problem. That is why my colleagues and I in the legislature have made bringing broadband to everyone in western Massachusetts such a high priority. In 2008 we passed broadband legislation into law, which provides \$40 million to begin building a network which will provide broadband to all underserved citizens, even in our most remote rural towns. It is a huge logistical challenge, but one that we are well on our way to meeting.

With this legislation we created the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), which is tasked with building the network's so-called "middle-mile" infrastructure and working with "last-mile" providers to actually connect and service individual homes and businesses. The target area for service is huge:

123 communities in western and central Massachusetts which have little or no broadband service. Although \$40 million is a lot of money, it is not enough to do the job without other resources. Fortunately, President Obama and Congress included funding for broadband in rural America in the Federal Stimulus program in 2009. Our state has received \$45.4 million in stimulus funding to allow us to embark on building a \$71.6 million fiber-optic middle mile backbone that will bring service into every unserved community. It is a huge undertaking, as the fiber-optic loop will be 1,338 miles long, and be strung along approximately 30,000 utility poles. To manage this project, MBI has just hired a company called Axia as the network operator. I believe that they have the experience and commitment to complete this work by the deadline of June 2013.

Concurrently, work is underway to be ready for the "last-mile" connections to the fiber backbone being built by MBI. Many of our towns have had broadband committees that have been working on this for years. One of the most exciting possibilities is the establishment of a community-owned fiber-to-the-home cooperative through a grass-roots organization known as WiredWest. They have been working in 47 of our most rural and unserved communities and you may have seen an article on your town meeting warrant to join the WiredWest effort. I believe that WiredWest holds great promise for establishing a locally-controlled and consumer-friendly last-mile network. There are also other technologies and efforts underway, and MBI is supporting some of these efforts with grants for planning and demonstration projects in some communities even before the middle-mile backbone is completed.

High-speed broadband is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity for our communities and citizens in order to make the most of economic, educational, and quality-of-life opportunities that broadband provides. When our network is up and operating, I have no doubt that seniors will also make the most of these opportunities to maximize their connectivity and connections with the wider world. Happy Older American's Month!

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