

THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE
PATRICK GOES TO BAT FOR BROADBAND PLAN

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By Matt Murphy, Eagle Boston Bureau

BOSTON — Gov. Deval L. Patrick pressed lawmakers to support his broadband Internet expansion proposal yesterday, a bill that has been championed by Western Massachusetts lawmakers representing many of the least served communities.

Patrick has proposed investing \$25 million in public funds to build high-speed Internet infrastructure and wireless towers in an attempt to leverage private investment from communications companies to expand in the western half of the state.

The governor's stated goal is to bring broadband access to 32 unserved communities in Berkshire, Hampshire, Franklin and Hampden Counties by 2010.

"Expanding broadband access — the purpose of the bill before you today — is one area where a targeted investment stands to bring considerable returns to the Commonwealth," Patrick testified before the Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets.

Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield, and state Reps. Dan E. Bosley, D-North Adams, William "Smitty" Pignatelli, D-Lenox, and Denis Guyer, D-Dalton, were all on hand for the hearing.

Downing, who represents 22 communities in the Berkshires that have zero broadband access, said this issue has been his No. 1 priority since being elected a little over a year ago. "The real issue here is there is an acute need in the unserved communities in Western Mass. and a larger need to upgrade telecommunication infrastructure across the Commonwealth," he said.

The governor's proposal would create a new Broadband Incentive Fund to be managed by a new division within the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative that has a higher level of expertise in dealing with broadband issues.

The new Massachusetts Broadband Institute would use the \$25 million in public funding to make targeted investments in broadband infrastructure that would attract major cable and Internet providers to partner with the state.

Downing said the bill might need to be broadened to offer something more to the dozens of communities in other areas of the state that are "underserved" by their Internet providers. Downing said there are at least 15 cities and towns in Berkshire County that he would consider underserved.

Such a change would almost certainly increase the price tag, but legislators promised to do whatever it takes to ensure the bill's success.

"We don't want to leave anything to chance with this," Downing said.

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