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Towns left scrambling for touch of broadband

By Carolyn Y. Johnson, Globe Staff | July 18, 2007

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GOSHEN -- On any given day in this rural town of about 1,000, a few people park their cars in front of Town Hall while they log onto the Internet.

But they aren't typical WiFi poachers. They are dial-up refugees.

In a high-tech state known for its knowledge economy, residents of Goshen and 31 other towns are living in a telecommunications Third World, relying on the equivalent of a horse and buggy to ride the information superhighway.

"We are creating a new kind of ghetto," said Don Dubendorf, president of Berkshire Connect Inc., which works to bring high-speed Internet connections to Western Massachusetts businesses and institutions. "It's morally wrong. It's stupid economically, it's dangerous from a public safety point of view, it's absurd from a public education point of view."

State officials have yet to develop a comprehensive policy for fixing the telecom time warp. But this fall, three Western Massachusetts towns will participate in an experiment to test wireless networks in rural settings.

The Legislature has created a new position, director of wireless and broadband development, to identify solutions for unserved communities.

And Governor Deval Patrick's cable commissioner, Sharon Gillett, has said making broadband ubiquitous is her top priority.

Verizon, Comcast, and others offer high-speed Internet in 90 percent of Massachusetts communities, but no providers offer broadband Internet access in 32 towns, and an additional 63 municipalities have limited service areas, according to a study by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's John Adams Innovation Institute. (The study did not include satellite Internet.)

It can be extremely expensive to build systems in areas where houses are often miles apart. But as everything from pop culture to presidential campaigns plays out on the Web, people who use dial-up are left out a lot. And they are growing desperate for high-speed service. Dial-up simply can't handle the graphics, pictures, sound, and video that have transformed the Internet in recent years.

Ed Lewis of Worthington makes a list of files he wants to download and burns them onto CDs every time he visits his sister-in-law in Pennsylvania.

State Representative Stephen Kulik, a Democrat who lives in Worthington, finds it hard to download any files over his home dial-up connection or search the state's laws online.

Worthington Selectman Evan Johnson said that about once a month the town is notified by the state that a government agency will accept electronically filed documents only -- whether it's a test that everyone in Town Hall must take for homeland security reasons, or tax documents. "Click wrong and another hour of your life is gone," Johnson said.

Leland Martin , 15, of Blandford, spent a week this summer at Gateway Regional High School, making videos at film camp. The videos are posted online, but if he or many of his friends want to watch them, they'll probably have to catch them on DVD.

And Steve Schulze of Worthington scrapped plans to prepare his taxes online when TurboTax prompted him to download an update -- via dial-up.

As broadband access has become a public utility that people compare to electricity, water, or paved roads, demands for its expansion have grown more urgent.

A study coauthored last year by Gillett when she was co-chair of the Broadband Working Group at MIT's Communication Futures Program found that among 22,390 ZIP codes, communities with broadband access recorded greater growth in jobs, businesses, and property values.

The report said communities with broadband access experienced an additional 1 to 1.4 percent in their job growth rate between 1998 and 2002. Those communities also saw an added 0.5 to 1.2 percent growth rate in the number of businesses. Housing rents, measured as a proxy for property values, were more than 6 percent higher in 2000 in communities where broadband was available by 1999.

Other states facing the digital divide have already begun to define goals. Vermont's governor made a commitment to having ubiquitous broadband in his state by 2010. Kentucky plans to have full broadband coverage by the end of the year.

"For Massachusetts, it's economic survival," said Patrick Larkin, director of the John Adams Innovation Institute at Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. "These are market failures, and I don't believe that by virtue of where you live it should dictate your ability to have threshold services in the Commonwealth."

The Patrick administration has yet to formulate a policy or provide funding to patch the holes in broadband coverage, but has appointed leaders committed to universal, affordable broadband access.

"We have to make sure that all of Massachusetts is open to business -- not just the areas where it is easier or more profitable for certain companies to make available high-speed Internet access to their customers," said Stan McGee, the state's director of wireless and broadband development, at a budget hearing in March.

While communities wait for a statewide policy, they are using the resources at hand.

Berkshire Connect Inc. and Pioneer Valley Connect are two projects that already bring businesses and institutions together so they can pool resources to buy expensive high-speed lines in places where major providers have no broadband networks. This fall, they will create WiFi hot spots in the towns of Florida, New Salem, and Worthington, with funding from the quasi-public John Adams Innovation Institute. The idea is to use radio transmitters to spread the signal from high-speed lines to create square-mile wireless broadband networks for homes, businesses, and municipal buildings, without the massive investment needed to wire every home.

Meanwhile, the Town of Goshen has used the high-speed line to its town offices to create a hot spot. "The coverage is pretty good in the driveway," said Selectman Larry Miller, who recently drove there to order a cellphone for his daughter, because the dial-up connection at home was too slow.

The Worthington health center, with its high-speed connection that costs \$1,100 a month, is considering turning its waiting room into a hot spot.

"We're kind of in the business of providing what the community needs for a healthy life, and access to information" is one aspect, said its executive director, Ed Sayer .

Kimberly and Amanda Cross, 19-year-old twins, have a technology-oriented summer job, building circuit boards at Worthington Assembly, an electronics manufacturer. But they applied to college this year using dial-up.

"We just deal with it," said Kimberly, who said it takes about 45 minutes to upload a few photos to her Facebook page and has looked at YouTube just twice.

"One step at a time," Amanda added. "It's frustrating -- the most patient person in the world is not patient enough."