

http://www.berkshireeagle.com/headlines/ci_6522995

THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

State plan could boost broadband

By Hillary Chabot, Eagle Boston Bureau, Berkshire Eagle
Thursday, August 02

BOSTON — In an effort to push 32 towns onto the information superhighway, Gov. Deval L. Patrick's administration will announce a \$25 million broadband access initiative in today. Dan O'Connell, Patrick's secretary of economic affairs, will announce the plan at Town Hall in Becket — one of 14 communities in the Berkshires that still depend on dial-up access to do business. The fund will use bonds to pay for broadband infrastructure such as conduits and wireless towers to spark private development in counties such as Berkshire, Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin, according to an official briefed on the plan.

Rep. Denis E. Guyer, D-Dalton, said the initiative is long overdue. "My towns have been at an economic and cultural disadvantage for too long," Guyer said, pointing to homeowners who can't telecommute, kids who can't do research for school, and businesses which can't expand. "This will help create jobs and help citizens in their day to day lives. It's an all-around great investment in the rural communities of the state," Guyer said.

The proposal will create a new division called the Broadband Institute within the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, which will ask private companies to compete for the state money. The division will put out a request for proposals in December meant to push private companies such as Verizon to build infrastructure in communities like Alford, Cheshire and Peru. The request will award money to those proposals that bring the most infrastructure into currently unserved areas.

Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield, said the step pushes private companies to go the extra mile. "It's a great day for Western Massachusetts, and it sends a strong signal that the western counties are ready to lead in new economy," Downing said.

"Over the last ten years, a lot of people in government thought Verizon or other companies would step up and build in these areas," Guyer added. "It's clear now they won't build it, so the government has to step up and take the lead or it won't happen."

Rep. William "Smitty" Pignatelli, D-Lenox, said the move is a great start in what needs to be a continuing process of investing in infrastructure in the Berkshires. He cited several underserved communities that still need attention. "This is the first step, and we need to keep walking," Pignatelli said, adding that he is planning on meeting with private investors Monday to discuss this kind of investment. "The timing of this is terrific. I can see some private-public partnerships developing," Pignatelli said.