




Patrick's goal: Broadband to all by 2010

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BECKET - Though the call for connectivity in rural communities was put out years ago, it wasn't until Thursday that residents and legislators got an answer.

Gov. Deval L. Patrick's administration announced a \$25 million broadband access initiative at a morning press conference.

More than 50 town residents, state legislators and members of the media gathered in front of the Becket Town Hall, where a call can be placed in seconds on a cellular phone but sending an email can take hours because of dial-up service.

When asked whether the initiative would make a difference, town resident Kathy Hayn Burt said, "Oh, you have no idea. Dial-up is so awful that most of us don't even use our computers here."

The \$25 million will go into a Broadband Incentive Fund designed to make public-private investments in Massachusetts communities without high-speed Internet access.

Department of Telecommunications and Cable Commissioner Sharon E. Gillet called the fund a "targeted public investment," which will be capitalized by bonds and managed by a new Massachusetts Technology Collaborative division called the Broadband Institute.

The division will ask private companies to compete for state money and may put out a request for broadband infrastructure proposals as early as December. Money will be awarded to the proposals that bring the most infrastructure - like conduits, fiber and wireless towers - into unserved areas.

The county's legislators and partners of the broadband initiative all praised Patrick and his administration for their leadership and action on the issue.

"We've studied this problem. We've surveyed this problem. We know there's a problem," said state Rep. Denis Guyer, D-Dalton, who has the largest district in the state. "This is more than words. [Patrick]'s doing it with deeds."

Joe LaCascia, a former second-home owner who now lives in Becket full-

time, said that traveling to the town was "like going back in time. This will bring essential upgrades to residents and especially businesses and second-home owners."

There are 32 towns currently without such access, 14 of which are in the Berkshires. An additional 63 commonwealth communities are partially served, with broadband only in certain areas of the towns. And all but one of these underserved communities are located in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties of western Massachusetts.

The ultimate goal of the initiative is to make broadband available to all communities by 2010.

"For a long time, these areas have been in the breakdown lane of the information superhighway. This is not an acceptable state," said Stan McGee, the state director of wireless and broadband development. At the press conference, McGee was dubbed the "broadband czar" of Massachusetts.

His position was included in an economic stimulus bill advocated by state Rep. Daniel Bosley, D-North Adams, which passed into law last year.

Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Dan O'Connell spoke Thursday on Patrick's behalf.

"This new fund will help level the playing field ... and pave the way for the economic development and job creation opportunities that go hand-in-hand with being wired for the 21st century."

Robert Gorden, a town resident, doesn't believe in ATM machines or cell phones. "But even a Luddite like me can see that this is important for everyone in the county," he said.

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