



Patrick's \$25 million broadband initiative could boost competition in city

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NORTHAMPTON - Northampton may not be on the list of western Massachusetts communities that don't have access to broadband Internet service, but that doesn't mean the city won't benefit from Gov. Deval L. Patrick's \$25 million broadband access initiative announced Thursday.

The city is not considered an underserved community because it has cable broadband and DSL service available. But Teri Anderson, the city's economic development coordinator, said there are pockets of the city where DSL is not offered, particularly in perimeter areas such as Florence, Leeds and near the Easthampton.

People in these areas have only one choice for high-speed Internet access, she said. The governor's new initiative will likely double the options for these businesses and residents in the near future, Anderson said.

"The city is really only serviced by one service provider," she said. "Customers have no choice unless they want to have their own fiber put in."

Overall, however, Northampton is one of the better served communities in western Massachusetts. There are 32 towns currently without any broadband access, 14 of which are in Hampshire and Franklin counties. An additional 63 commonwealth communities are partially served, with broadband only in certain areas of the towns.

Anderson said the top goal of the governor's proposal is to make sure that everyone has equal access to broadband service. Secondary goals include giving people choice and affordability when selecting a provider. If approved by the Legislature, the \$25 million will go into a Broadband Incentive Fund designed to make public-private investments in communities without high-speed Internet access. The funds will be 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 - such as conduits, fiber and wireless towers - into unserved areas.

Anderson, who sits on a steering committee at Pioneer Valley Connect, anticipates that organization may team up with Franklin County Connect to try to find a way to use the state funds to install and implement a network that could connect Hampshire, Franklin, Berkshire and Hampden counties.

The two regional organizations have been working on bringing broadband to western Massachusetts for 10 years, and recently completed a joint project called "Connecting Western Massachusetts." This project involved asking telecommunications consultants to design a hybrid fiber optic and wireless network. The experts estimated it would cost \$20 million to deploy such a hybrid network in the unserved and underserved communities of western Massachusetts.

The two groups, known as The Connects, then asked the Massachusetts legislative delegation and Patrick's administration to commit to a \$20 million capital investment.

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