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WORTHINGTON IN AT GROUND ZERO ON WIRELESS INTERNET TEST

BY JOSH WILDER

WORTHINGTON - Residents searching for high-speed Internet access on the back roads of rural Worthington have long been left feeling out of the loop - although that may be about to change.

The town is one of three communities selected to test broadband Internet capability in a region where most rural towns are still using dial-up, according to Pioneer Valley Connect co-chairwoman Linda Dunlavy.

The Beta Test Program will install and evaluate the function of three wireless Internet networks in unserved areas across western Massachusetts over the course of a year. The two other towns being tracked are Florida and New Salem.

'All of western Massachusetts needs broadband Internet,' Dunlavy said. 'It has become an indispensable part of our life and society.'

In Worthington, the broadband connection is being set up in the center of town, according to Selectmen Chairman Evan Johnson. Approximately 25 to 30 homes and businesses are installing the connection, ranging from Town Hall to the highway department building.

As of Monday, the network was operating, but not yet officially launched. A spokeswoman for Pioneer Valley Connect said the test will be declared open in a week or so.

'We are excited to be a part of this project,' Johnson said.

The only alternative means of getting high-speed access today in Worthington is to pay for relatively expensive satellite service, through a company such as HughesNet. Subscribers receive downloads from a satellite to their home-based satellite dish.

The broadband project got a boost last week with the filing of a \$25 million bond bill by Gov. Deval Patrick. Patrick announced his plans in August to push for statewide broadband access. The governor filed a bond bill last Thursday that would create a Massachusetts Broadband Institute within the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

The money allocated for the proposal would be used to attract broadband providers to build an infrastructure throughout the region.

Cyndi Roy, a spokeswoman for the governor's office, said Monday supporters hope hearings will be held swiftly and the measure enacted by the Legislature.

Suited to region

While setting up a broadband connection in the area is the first step, the real challenge is to keep it running smoothly in spite of hilly terrain and low population densities, Dunlavy said.

'Worthington is a place that has never had a high-speed connection before,' she said. 'We will find out if there is a wireless network that can function in this part of the state.'

Once the installation process is complete, Pioneer Valley Connect will be monitoring the connection's performance. The results will be posted on the group's Web site for analysis.

'By testing these technologies and seeing how they work, we hope to inform other communities on how they could get broadband also,' Dunlavy said.

Goal is 2010

Patrick's plan has been embraced by state Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, who represents towns with limited to no broadband access in both Hampshire and Franklin counties.

'I have been working closely with the governor's administration to see the bill through,' Kulik said. 'Our goal is to evaluate these underserved communities and provide them with universal broadband service by 2010.'

With the majority of underserved towns located in western Massachusetts, Kulik acknowledged that residents are frustrated.

'It is impossible to move forward this day and age without high-speed Internet,' he said. 'The social and cultural needs of these communities will not be met without such access.'

Since Patrick's broadband proposal would not be approved by the Legislature until later this fall, some see the Beta Test Program as a temporary way to fix a larger problem.

'This is a stop-gap solution right now,' Dunlavy said. 'Having Internet in three communities will not change things overnight, but it is a start.'

While it may be difficult for some to imagine attempting to do Internet research with a dial-up connection, it is an everyday task for longtime Worthington resident J.P. Welch.

'I have a farm market and sell a lot of products online,' Welch said. 'Having high-speed Internet would make business a lot better.'

Welch, 50, has lived in Worthington for more than 25 years, and believes everyone in the town is ready for a change in Internet service.

'Everyone I have talked to would pay for the high-speed,' Welch said. 'It would be a big step forward for our town.'