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THE BOSTON GLOBE

State to unveil telecom plan for rural areas

By Carolyn Y. Johnson, Globe Staff | August 2, 2007

In front of Becket Town Hall this morning, Patrick administration officials plan to unveil a \$25 million plan to bring broadband to 32 communities that don't have access to cable or DSL service.

The money will fund the construction of basic telecom infrastructure -- such as fiber cables and towers, according to a person briefed on the plan who spoke on condition of anonymity because its details had not yet been made public.

The Broadband Incentive Plan, which the administration intends to fund through general obligation bonds, will be managed by a new division within the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. The plan is designed to create a new incentive for private industry by underwriting part of the costs of providing service in rural areas. Ultimately, administration officials hope public/private partnerships will be formed to provide service.

Details about the technology to be deployed, the timeline for connecting cities and towns, and the process by which private partners will be selected for the project were not disclosed yesterday.

The disclosure is the administration's first step toward expanding broadband access in the state, where 32 communities are completely unserved and 63 are underserved, according to a study by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's John Adams Innovation Institute. The study did not include satellite Internet.

Broadband access efforts so far have ranged from small-scale projects like the WiFi hotspot outside Goshen Town Hall or businesses sharing an expensive satellite Internet connection to more organized efforts. The Berkshire Valley Connect Inc. and Pioneer Valley Connect projects aggregate demand in parts of Western Massachusetts so that businesses and institutions can pool their resources to reduce the cost of high-speed Internet access.

This fall, the towns of Florida, New Salem, and Worthington will experiment with deploying wireless networks in square-mile areas to see if technologies deployed in urban areas work in the sometimes hilly, leafy rural communities of Western Massachusetts.

The state's cable commissioner, Sharon Gillett, will appear at the event in Becket, located just south of Pittsfield, along with Stan McGee, the state's first director of wireless and broadband development, and other administration officials.

Gillett has said that expanding broadband access is her top priority. Last year, she co-authored a report showing that communities with broadband access experienced greater growth in jobs, businesses, and property values than those without access.

Mark Horan, executive director of the Massachusetts Network Communications Council, said he hoped the administration would tap the expertise of Massachusetts companies, which have a strong base in telecom infrastructure.

"Industry could be helpful here in any broadband initiatives, and not just the wireline companies but also the whole slew of new wireless companies," he said. "I think it makes sense for us to work together. We would certainly want to be involved."