

THE RECORDER
BRIDGING OUR DIGITAL DIVIDE

By Richie Davis, Recorder Staff

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A Franklin County contingent is expected to testify today in Boston on a \$25 million initiative to help bring broadband to the region.

Greenfield Community College President Robert L. Pura and Franklin Regional Council of Governments Executive Director Linda Dunlavy were among those advocating for the governor's proposed Massachusetts Broadband Institute to attract private firms to connect 32 unserved western Massachusetts communities by 2010.

"The digital divide is absolutely real," said Pura, who prepared written testimony for the Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets. "For anybody in our county who doesn't have access to broadband, it's distancing them not only from economic empowerment, but socially as well."

"It's a very significant undermining of our region," said Pura. "We have to do everything we can to promote this bill."

Pura's written testimony says the pending legislation "is critical for positive economic and work force growth for the Commonwealth, especially for western Massachusetts."

Dunlavy, who co-directs Pioneer Valley Connect, a business, government and educational coalition working for nearly a decade to bring high-speed telecommunication to the region -- said the testimony of Pioneer Valley and Berkshire connects would "try to show all the work that's been done and the successes we've had and the limitations of our success, to prove that public investment is necessary."

There are 32 communities --all within western Massachusetts -- without any access to commercial broadband service, and another 63 with limited access, predominantly in the four western counties, she said. Nearly one-third of western Massachusetts towns are without any form of broadband access.

The hope is the \$25 million investment will help "push the private sector to partner with the state and bring broadband to the unserved and under-served areas. It's a predominantly western Mass. problem," Dunlavy said.

A Massachusetts Technology Collaborative map shows that only Whately, Bernardston and Athol in this region are served by two broadband providers and no Franklin County town is served in its entirety.

The new Broadband Institute, which would be created as part of the state's MTC, will use the proposed fund to invest in fiber-optic cable, conduits, wireless towers and other broadband infrastructure in unserved areas.

At least one bus from western Massachusetts was scheduled to carry people who are testifying on the legislation. In addition, groups like the Shutesbury-Leverett-Wendell-Broadband Committee, which has been working for more than a half-dozen years to bring high-speed connections to their towns, have solicited written testimony.

Among these are Julian M. Olf of Leverett, a University of Massachusetts theater professor, who expresses concern over "the ability of educators to serve their students at a time in our culture when the Internet has created a nearly seamless communications network -- one that is transforming the structure of the work day and the workplace."

Shutesbury patent draftsman Greg Caulton has written, "I wouldn't be able to work from my home in Shutesbury without the fractional T1 that I've been forced to purchase at a cost of more than \$300 per month. My competitors in other parts of the country pay less per year for DSL than I pay for one month of my T1 line. This disparity disadvantages my business and inhibits its growth. Yet I'm the lucky one around here! There are many home-based businesses in Shutesbury that would expand simply because they had what is generally considered 'normal' Internet access.

Raymond Wilson of Rowe, who is in an engineering-oriented sales business requiring transfer of large files, writes that with only dial-up service available, "I am in a position where I am only able to accomplish what I need to do by mailing information on CD's because dial-up service simply cannot handle files this large. Clearly, this puts me at a serious competitive disadvantage."

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