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WMass needs to join 21st century express

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Editorial

While Greater Boston communities are speeding along the high-speed Internet highway toward the next decade of the 21st century, parts of Western Massachusetts are still stuck in the 20th century.

Consider this: the highest number of communities with no access to broadband services are located in the western part of the state. Fifteen towns in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin counties have no broadband while another 22 have limited service.

It's hardly a selling point and the situation is enough to make folks out here believe that we really do live in the last century. The absence of high-speed Internet access poses a serious threat to the growth of the local economy. Despite the beauty of the region, it's unlikely that an entrepreneur with a great business plan would plant roots in Western Massachusetts without a way to connect to the marketplace beyond these hills and valleys. And students from the region would be at a serious disadvantage compared to students who do have access.

In the 21st century, high-speed Internet access is a must. Western Massachusetts needs to hop on that highway - and fast.

That's why we support Gov. Deval L. Patrick's plan to bridge the digital divide between east and west. The governor has filed a bill to provide $25 million in bonds to expand high-speed Internet to Western Massachusetts and other areas of the state.

The $25 million will be used to leverage private money for installing fiber optic cable, conduits, wireless towers and other infrastructure. The bill would also create a "Massachusetts Broadband Institute" to oversee investments from the $25 million and create a plan for developing more high-speed Internet.

"The digital divide that persists in too many Massachusetts communities has gone on for long enough," Patrick said.

We agree. It's time for Western Massachusetts to hop on the high-speed highway to the future.