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Town Hall Connectivity Needs in Western Massachusetts March 5, 2007

Current Status of Connectivity in Western Massachusetts

Approximately one-third of the municipalities in Western Massachusetts do not have access to cable television broadband or Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) service in their community. It is estimated that another third of the municipalities have access in only limited areas of the community. This lack of broadband access has left many Western Massachusetts municipal governments unable to connect to vital public health and safety networks, complete necessary state and federal reporting requirements, and communicate with their constituency and other government agencies.

In 2005, the local Public Health Emergency Preparedness Coalitions in Western Massachusetts procured high speed internet access for eligible Boards of Health through funding from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH). Eligible Boards of Health were located in communities without access to cable television broadband or DSL service. Twenty-five Boards of Health received T1 telecommunications services in their town halls for a minimum 12-month period. Some Boards of Health were unable to participate because of unexpected construction and installation costs. For those that participated, many connected multiple town departments through wired and wireless networks.

Of the twenty-five T1s installed through this effort, as of this date, fifteen have had their grant-funded service period end. Only one town hall has been able to financially commit to continue these services for a three-year contract. Another three town halls have been able to extend the service to the end of the fiscal year. Of the town halls that are still within their grant-funded service period, few expect to continue the service once the grant period has ended. The cost of T1 service is \$500 to \$1,000 a month, depending on the vendor and the location of the town hall. While the need for broadband is critical, many small communities are unable to afford the \$6,000-12,000 per year cost. For larger communities, this may seem like a feasible expenditure in the greater municipal budget; however, it is not for these underserved communities. As a point of reference, in fiscal year 2005 the average amount of total general fund expenditures for these communities was about \$1.7 million. For the majority of these communities, the primary source to fund these town budgets is the residential property owner. For small population towns, the allocation of these scarce resources for broadband is an impossible task in the current municipal financial climate.

Town Halls Unable to Communicate with State Agencies

State agencies are increasingly requiring local governments to use online reporting systems, submit reports electronically, and access necessary bulletins and forms from websites. Many of these forms and publications are no longer mailed to town halls. These functions simply cannot be completed adequately and efficiently with a dial up connection. Without access to high speed internet services like cable television broadband or DSL, the only remaining option that offers reliable service is T1. Some municipalities have resorted to satellite service for broadband. These municipalities report that satellite service is unreliable, particularly during strong weather events, and has varying and insufficient connection speeds.

From timely reporting of election results to the latest advisory from the Mass Health Alert Network, access to high speed internet is necessary for municipal staff and public officials to interact with every Commonwealth agency. Here are a few examples:

- For procurement related issues, broadband connectivity is necessary to access Comm-PASS and view the state vendor contracts.
- The Operational Services Division offers online filing for the Goods & Services Bulletin, or allows faxed submissions using forms that must be downloaded from the website. Both of these actions require a sufficient bandwidth to access and download the document.
- The State Office of Women & Minority Owned Businesses requires all quarterly reports to be submitted via email.
- The State Fire Marshall's office requires Fire Department's to download various permit forms.

The Department of Revenue has been a leader in creating an electronic communication and reporting environment. Announcements are sent over email, publications are to be downloaded from the website, and towns are required to submit financial reports online. With dial up connections it is sometimes impossible to download or submit many of the required documents. The Department of Revenue has recognized the need for broadband and is supportive of broadband deployment efforts for the underserved communities of Western Massachusetts. (For more information, please go to www.mass.gov and search for "Technology: No Small Town Left Behind.")

Many State agencies operate their respective applications on servers that currently support access from both broadband and dial-up connections. However, many of these agencies may choose to eliminate the dial-up access in the near future, because it is costly to maintain and the performance is marginal. As this shift occurs, town halls without broadband access will be further isolated from State agencies.

Towns are Also Unconnected to Residents

In addition to communication with state and federal agencies, broadband eases communication between government officials and their constituents. This is particularly important for small towns with limited staff hours and a residential base that works outside of the community they live in. Often local government access to broadband

facilitates the creation and maintenance of a municipal website, that provides important information to residents, such as meeting notices, zoning bylaws, and permit forms.

The Connects are Committed to Broadband

Berkshire Connect, Inc. and Pioneer Valley Connect are working with the John Adams Innovation Institute of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative to address the problem of broadband access in Western Massachusetts. Their mission is to create an advanced telecommunications landscape that will have affordable, reliable and redundant high capacity broadband service available throughout Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire Counties. Until a solution is implemented, town halls will struggle to meet routine functions due to the lack of broadband access. The Connects strongly encourage the Commonwealth to support broadband connectivity, particularly for T1 access.