

Pioneer Valley Connect – 2006 Review

The following is a summary of highlights from Pioneer Valley Connect's activities over the past year.

John Adams Innovation Institute & the Underserved Communities Project – Pioneer Valley Connect and Berkshire Connect Inc. (“the Connects”) were awarded a joint Regional Priority Grant from the John Adams Innovation Institute (JAII) of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. This award allows the Connects to develop a long-term, sustainable broadband solution for the underserved communities in Western Massachusetts, as well as test various wireless broadband technologies for their effectiveness in serving small, neighborhood areas as a short-term solution.

The “Underserved Communities Project” (UCP) is taking the findings from a 2006 pilot project study to the next stage. The 2006 pilot project explored how to bring and distribute broadband to the three communities of Egremont, Leverett and Worthington in a way that is affordable and replicable in the other thirty underserved communities of the region. It was determined that the most efficient and sustainable solution is to construct sub-regional fiber assets with a wireless network overlay to distribute broadband to households and businesses. The implementation of this model will require both public and private sector investment and a management structure to operate and maintain the network. The JAII award allows the Connects to design this network, develop an organizational structure, and identify funding sources for the solution's implementation.

Connects Beta Test Program – The Connects will conduct a test of wireless technologies in at least three selected areas of Western Massachusetts. The purpose of this test is to assess the success of installing and operating a wireless network in small rural areas (e.g. areas no larger than one square mile, not town or region-wide). The Beta Test will be undertaken in partnership with selected communities. These communities will be responsible for assembling participants in a defined area to implement the test. The technology and network to be tested will be developed by the technical consultants of the Connects. The criteria and process for selecting the communities to partner will be announced in February 2007. The results from the Beta Tests will be shared with the region for replication in other areas.

Fall/Winter Broadband Forums – A series of broadband forums were held in the Pioneer Valley and Berkshire County in Autumn 2006. The first forum, titled “Broadband 101”, provided an overview of technologies and the issues

that impact underserved communities in Western Massachusetts. A DVD of the Broadband 101 forum held in Greenfield on November 1, 2006 will be available to be borrowed. The second forum, titled The Underserved Communities Project, described the findings of the Pilot Project completed earlier in the year and the next steps to develop a sustainable, long-term solution. In addition, the forum announced the Connects Beta Test Program to be undertaken in 2007.

Additional Efforts – One function of Pioneer Valley Connect is to act as a facilitator and collaborator for broadband deployment efforts in the region. Some of the efforts that PVC Steering Committee members and staff have been working with over the past year include: providing information to Governor Patrick’s Transition Team on broadband issues; monitoring the Board of Health (BOH) Internet Project; and advocating for conduit assets to be part of the I-91 Intelligent Transportation System project.

Future Initiatives – The Connects have much work to do in 2007 and 2008. To assist the Connects, consultant Maggie Bergin was hired as Project Manager of the Underserved Communities Project to work with the Connect team. She will start in January 2007. The Connect team will also be producing the “Municipal Broadband Toolkit” which will be a collection of online resources to assist town governments and local broadband groups in addressing issues impacting underserved communities.

For more information about Pioneer Valley Connect, please go to: www.pioneervalleyconnect.org or contact Jessica Atwood at the Franklin Regional Council of Governments at jatwood@frcog.org or 413-774-1194 x101.