

Pioneer Valley Connect – 2005 Review

This past year has been one of the busiest for the Pioneer Valley Connect effort. The following is a brief overview:

Demand-Aggregation Effort/Preferred Provider – Like Berkshire Connect, Pioneer Valley Connect completed a demand aggregation effort by soliciting potential business demand throughout the three counties of the Pioneer Valley and using the resultant figures to lure more private telecommunications investment to the region. We were extremely pleased to endorse a local company, Crocker Communications (www.crocker.com), as Pioneer Valley Connect's Preferred Provider. Crocker Communications, which began as an answering service business, has evolved to one of the largest Internet Service Providers in our region, and is now a licensed Competitive Local Exchange Carrier (CLEC). Crocker Communications continues to grow and is building its own infrastructure throughout the Pioneer Valley. Since endorsement, Crocker Communications has put equipment into both the Northampton and Greenfield Verizon Central Office locations and plans to continue expanding their infrastructure throughout the region as demand indicates.

Board of Health (BOH) Internet Project - The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) has created a web-based bio-terrorism alert system to be used by local Boards of Health. DPH realized that for the system to be most effective during a bio-terrorism event or similar public health emergency, local Boards of Health need broadband access. DPH allocated approximately \$300,000 to bring T-1 lines to under-served communities in western Massachusetts for a one-year period. Pioneer Valley Connect, in coordination with Berkshire Connect and the region's public health coalitions, has secured through a competitive bidding process, two providers to bring T-1 lines to these communities. Crocker Communications was selected to serve most of the eligible communities in Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden Counties. The partnership of Cinetel Solutions and Lightship was selected to serve Berkshire County communities and those communities in Franklin County with a 978 area code. As many of you know, there have been some complications in this process for the towns of Mt. Washington, Hawley and Heath. The condition of the Verizon wiring in these three communities was not equipped to deliver T-1 lines. Additional Special Construction Fees were being applied in order to get a T-1 to these locations. Given that there were no extra funds to pay for these fees, a lengthy process was undertaken to try to resolve this issue. In the end, Mt. Washington and Heath were able to proceed in the project using funds from towns that withdrew from the project. This includes the town of Hawley, which voluntarily withdrew, but is still very interested in participating if funds become available.

Underserved Communities Pilot Project – With Regional Competitiveness Council funding, Pioneer Valley Connect and Berkshire Connect have hired two telecommunications consultants to study how to bring and distribute broadband to three underserved communities in an affordable and replicable way. Already, the consultants have conducted an assessment of broadband availability in the western Massachusetts. The information collected was used to select the pilot project

communities. (The assessment database may be viewed on the www.pioneervalleyconnect.org and www.bconnect.org websites.) The communities selected as Pilot Project locations were: Egremont in Berkshire County, Leverett in Franklin County, and Worthington in Hampshire County. By April 2006, the consultants will report on the condition of the existing infrastructure in these three communities, and suggest a technical solution of bringing broadband to a majority of the businesses and homes in each of these towns. This model will include an analysis of costs for the implementation of the proposed solution. In addition, the consultants will examine how this solution could be expanded to other underserved communities in Western Massachusetts. Once this work is complete, funding for implementation will be pursued.

Interstate 91 (I-91) Fiber and Conduit Project – More than \$11 million has been secured to install telecommunications fiber and conduit the length of the I-91 corridor between the Connecticut and Vermont borders. This fiber and conduit will be used for Intelligent Transportation System purposes, but also has the potential to have a significant, positive impact for broadband expansion in underserved communities, economic development, and public safety. The MassHighway Department (MHD) has recently agreed to separate the project into two parts: design and construction, which will be managed by MHD District 2 in Northampton; and development of an asset management model, which will be managed by the MHD Commissioner's office. Pioneer Valley Connect's telecommunications consultants, funded by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, have already met with MHD District 2 personnel to discuss how the project can be designed to meet multiple purposes. These consultants have also been meeting with telecommunications companies to determine their current and future usage interests and a preferred asset management model. MassHighway has agreed to work closely with our consultants and have committed to make every effort to get the project to the design-build stage by Spring of 2006.

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: supporting the Five College Dark Fiber Ring; participating in the U.S. General Accounting Office's (GAO) study of broadband availability and adoption in Massachusetts; and exploring opportunities for collaboration with the Western Massachusetts Homeland Security Council.

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.