

THE REPUBLICAN
SPEEDY RURAL INTERNET URGED

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By Dan Ring

BOSTON - Gov. Deval L. Patrick yesterday urged legislators to approve his bill to borrow \$25 million to expand high-speed Internet lines to rural areas of Western Massachusetts and other parts of the state.

During a hearing by the Joint Committee on Bonding, Capital Expenditures and State Assets, Patrick said the \$25 million will allow the state to construct and own fiber, wireless towers, conduits and other components critical for high-speed Internet access.

Patrick said 63 towns in the state have only partial access to broadband service and 32 have no access at all. He said he wants those communities provided high-speed Internet over the next three years.

"Broadband is a necessary service that stands to improve opportunities in education, civic engagement and ... economic growth," Patrick told legislators.

Fifteen towns in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin counties have no broadband. Another 22 have limited service, according to a survey by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative released in August.

Right now, cable television companies and Verizon Communications Inc. are refusing to provide high-speed Internet to certain towns and rural areas, municipal officials and state legislators said yesterday.

David Greenberg, of Colrain, director of the Technology in Education Partnership of Western Massachusetts in Shelburne Falls, said homes are too spread out in some areas to make it economical for companies to invest and provide high-speed Internet service.

Colrain has no broadband, according to Greenberg.

"It's very, very difficult for us to be competitive in Western Massachusetts," Greenberg said. "We strongly support this bill."

An official for Verizon also backed the goal of the bill.

"We agree that where broadband is not available, there is a role for government to participate in finding innovative ways to deliver access," said Joseph Zukowski, a vice president with Verizon.

Robert J. Bott, 68, of Washington in the Berkshires, said he is forced to use dial-up access to the Internet.

"It's very, very slow," he said.

Some people use satellite access, but that can be unreliable, according to Bott, a member of the Planning Board in Washington.

State Reps. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, Denis E. Guyer, D-Dalton, William Pignatelli, D-Lenox, and Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield, testified in favor of the bill.

Kulik said the bill would create the "Massachusetts Broadband Institute," led by a nine-member board.

Kulik said the institute would seek bids from companies such as Verizon to build the infrastructure and provide service.

"The private sector won't make investments on its own," Kulik said. "This primes the pump with state money to build hard assets."

"The state is not going to provide broadband service," Kulik added. "We want to work with existing companies that do this for a living. They are not willing to do it without public investment."

Material from the State House News Service was used in this report.

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