

Broader Broadband Could Be On Its Way

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Underserved towns could see more competition

As the owner of home-based food company Everyday Homemade, New Braintree resident Sue Christian depends on the Internet.

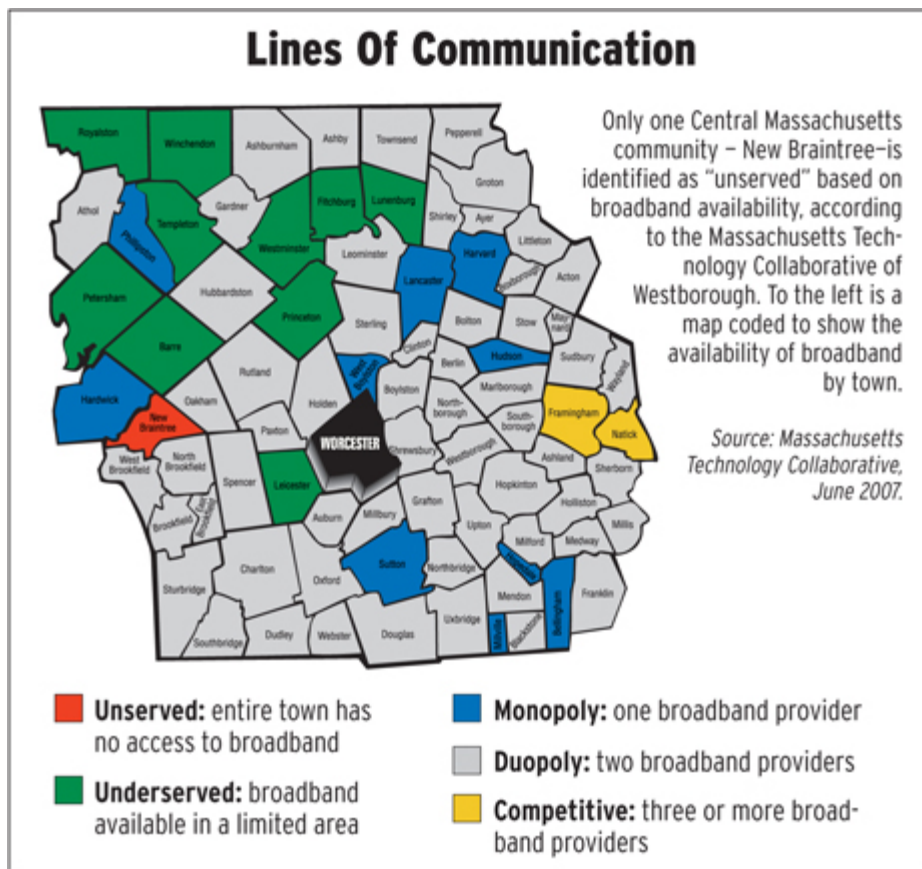
But just downloading e-mail orders for cookies, breads and catered meals can be a frustrating experience for her because she has a dial-up connection.

"It's very slow, and you get kicked off," she said.

Christian said she has recently heard that Verizon is expanding its DSL service into her area, and she's happy to hear it. And she's not the only one pleased with the direction broadband Internet is headed in the area. While recent announcements by Gov. Deval Patrick and Verizon about expanding broadband service are focused mainly on the western part of the state, Central Massachusetts has something to gain as well.

Project Pipeline

Patrick's proposal, which has yet to move forward in the legislature, would put up to \$25 million toward wireless towers, conduits and other infrastructure. The plan is designed to encourage private telecom and cable companies to deliver broadband to un- or under-served communities, which are mostly in Western Massachusetts.



Meanwhile, Verizon has announced its own \$200 million, three-part plan to expand its Internet service in the state this year. The company said it will bring DSL to 23 Western Massachusetts communities that now have no broadband at all. It will also bring faster DSL service to 24 communities, including Bolton, Berlin, Hubbardston, Harvard, Oakham and Petersham. Last, the company will start offering fiberoptic television service in 30 communities that already have good broadband service, including Ashland, Bellingham, Grafton, Hudson, Maynard, Milford, Millbury, Northborough, Stow and Sutton. The company is marketing the television service mainly to the residential market, spokesman Phil Santoro said.

While almost all cities and towns in Central Massachusetts have some DSL or cable Internet service, broadband coverage often only covers a limited area. For example, Santoro said Verizon can only provide DSL to customers within three miles of the company’s local switching center.

Guerillas In Our Midst

Often, even local officials aren’t aware of what parts of their communities have the faster service, according to George “Chip” Brodeur of BNC Network Consulting in Long Meadow who did a study of local broadband availability for the North Central Massachusetts Economic Development Council. He said officials who want to make sure their communities are well served should survey local residents and businesses and then negotiate with the carriers for better service.

“It’s more like guerilla warfare,” he said. “Broadband guerrilla warfare.”

Brodeur said it makes sense that both Patrick’s and Verizon’s DSL initiatives are focused on the

western part of the state. Still, the council's director, Nancy Jackson, said she would like to see more support for Central Massachusetts broadband. She said she is disappointed that the company is focusing much of its attention on bringing new television service to areas that are already well served.

"We want them to serve industrial parks," she said. "Well, they're not going to get the big TV contracts there."

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