

THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

County gets linked

By Matt Murphy, Eagle Boston Bureau

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BOSTON — Verizon yesterday announced a \$200 million upgrade that could finally deliver high-speed Internet service to several unserved Berkshire County communities.

In announcing plans to expand its fiber optic television and Internet network, Verizon said it would offer its DSL Internet service — which is carried over phone lines — to 23 Western Massachusetts communities, including the Berkshire towns of Becket, Sandisfield, Florida, Hancock, New Ashford, New Marlborough and Windsor.

At the same time, 24 new communities, including Otis, Stockbridge and West Stockbridge, will receive upgrades to their service, doubling the speed of data travel for many customers.

The expansion comes as Gov. Deval L. Patrick has proposed creating a \$25 million broadband incentive fund to encourage Internet providers to branch out into unserved and underserved communities.

Local legislators praised the effort that they said will allow the economy to grow by making it possible for new and existing businesses to set up and expand in the region.

Although Verizon's plans are not directly related to Patrick's legislation, company officials said they look forward to working closely with the administration to expand further into untapped markets.

"This shows that the state commitment to universal access to broadband is going to spur action, both through those with whom we negotiate but also action that we can't predict from the private sector," said Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield.

"In serving these communities, Verizon will provide broadband in two-thirds of the communities identified by the state as those without broadband service," said Donna Cupelo, Verizon region president for Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Verizon plans to apply for cable licenses to offer its FIOS TV service to 30 communities in 2008, building on the 63 cities and towns where it is available today. None of those TV communities are in Berkshire County.

There are 14 communities in Berkshire County unserved by a high-speed Internet provider, forcing government and businesses to rely on slower, less reliable dial-up connections.

"It shows a tremendous commitment by Verizon to Western Massachusetts and central Massachusetts and all of Massachusetts," said state Rep. Daniel E. Bosley, D-North Adams. "It's building a business network in Western Mass. that has been hampered by our lack of broadband access."

That lack has prevented many communities, such as Becket and New Ashford, from bringing business to the region, said Rep. Denis E. Guyer, D-Dalton.

"A lot of these towns are second-home-owner towns. Residents have told me they would love to expand their small business but can't because of no Internet access," Guyer said. "We're very appreciative of the investment."

Verizon also intends to hire about 200 new customer service employees, union jobs that will be based in Andover, Springfield, Taunton and Worcester.

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