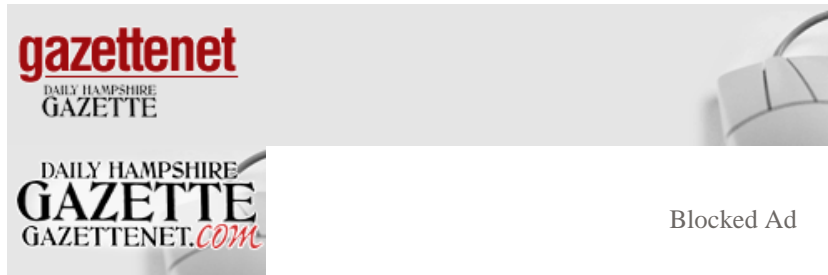


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High-speed Hilltowns Verizon will offer broadband soon

BY JEREMY DIRAC GAZETTE CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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If you can't get high-speed Internet now, you just might within the next year.

On Thursday, Verizon announced a \$200 million plan to offer broadband access to 23 new towns in western Massachusetts.

According to a press release, in Hampshire County, Cummington, Goshen, Middlefield, Pelham, Plainfield, Westhampton and Worthington, would benefit. In Franklin County, the towns are Colrain, Heath, Leverett, Leyden, Monroe and Rowe.

Much faster than dial-up

Within a year, on average, 70 percent of Verizon's customers in those towns will be able to download at 3 megabits per second (mbps), or 53 times faster than dial-up Internet service, Verizon spokesman Phil Santoro said Thursday.

Some towns will be less covered, others more. It may be that in some towns, 60 percent of Verizon's customers will be covered, while in others, 90 percent, Santoro said, although he didn't have the actual coverage figures.

Verizon considers the individual towns' coverage to be proprietary information, Santoro said.

The cost of buying service in rural communities will be the same as it is in the cities, \$13 per month for 1.5 mbps, and \$40 for 3 mbps, Santoro said.

For many towns, not having high-speed Internet has been a problem, limiting commerce, information and education. About 300 people were expected to pack the Clarion Hotel and Conference Center in Northampton for a forum on high-speed Internet Saturday, but the event was canceled because of expected inclement weather.

Earlier this week on Wednesday, 130 residents of the towns of Shelburne and Buckland packed the Shelburne-Buckland Community Center in a public hearing that was part of Comcast Communications cable service contract renewal process.

There, people spoke of being unable to sell homes or rent out apartments in regions that don't receive high-speed Internet; of college students who can't do homework because the dial-up is too slow; and of home-based businesses whose growth is restrained by the limitations of dial-up.

The town of Rowe, which had just 209 homes as of the 2000 census, saw access to high-speed Internet as so vital a commodity, that at Town Meeting, its voters decided to spend \$18,500 to research the cost of setting up a broadband system.

"When it takes two hours to download a PowerPoint presentation from Tokyo, it kind of hurts your competitiveness," said Rowe resident B.J. Roche, who makes

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her living as a writer, at a hearing last fall with the Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Cable. "The jobs are gone. Where are they going to come from?"

Last year, about 65 Rowe residents petitioned the state, not for high-speed Internet, but for general phone service relief, with residents complaining of phone outages, lines going dead, hearing other people's conversations, and connections going fuzzy. Proper phone service is particularly important in Rowe, as the town, like many portions of western Massachusetts, has virtually no cell phone coverage.

"In my travels, I see farmers in truly remote areas of China on a cell phone," Rowe resident Ray Wilson complained.

But along with high-speed Internet, communities with the new equipment, like Rowe, should see an improvement in regular phone service, too, Santoro said.

Verizon plans to put new digital subscriber line equipment in central switching offices and to use fiber-optic connections and remote electronic hubs to extend the reach of these and other DSL-capable switches, said a press release.

Some other towns that already have some high-speed Internet access will get higher-speed access, going from 3 mbps to 7 mbps. In Franklin County, that includes Charlemont, Conway, Millers Falls and Northfield. In Hampshire County, that includes Chesterfield, Huntington and Hatfield.

Those towns aren't expected to see an increase in their regular high-speed Internet coverage, however, Santoro said.

"The governor and western Massachusetts legislators have put the proper focus on the real need for broadband expansion in the region, and we want to do everything we can to address that need," said Donna Cupelo, Verizon's regional president for Massachusetts and Rhode Island, according to a press release.

"We look forward to working with our government leaders to explore ways to bring broadband to other areas in Massachusetts that are in need. With this capital investment plan, we are making a major commitment to our customers and our employees in Massachusetts."

Verizon's \$200 million investment drew praise from state legislators, who issued prepared statements.

"In addition to the economic benefits, broadband access would also have a positive environmental impact by making telecommuting possible, which of course reduces the number of cars on the highway," said state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, D-Amherst. "But broadband is also a matter of fairness. People, especially students, in rural areas should not be deprived of the educational opportunities afforded by broadband."

State Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, said, "As the Legislature moves forward with Gov. Patrick's broadband legislation, I look forward to continuing to work with the industry toward achieving 100 percent broadband coverage for each and every citizen, without regard to where they may live."

Meanwhile, some, such as the people who attended a meeting with Comcast in Shelburne Wednesday, are hoping that the cable company will join Verizon by expanding its high-speed Internet offerings.