



## Broadband bill sets up 3-year window

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Now that Gov. Deval Patrick has signed a \$40 million broadband incentive bill to help provide high-speed Internet access to remote rural areas, what's next for the underserved -- or even unserved -- hilltowns of western Massachusetts?

'What does this mean for Shelburne and Buckland? It means, in 36 months, we should be wired for broadband,' said Glenn Cardinal, the Buckland co-chair of the Shelburne Falls Cable Advisory Committee. 'But how the minutia all works is still a little bit of an unknown. Nobody is sure just yet how to implement this.'

Cardinal was in the rural town of Goshen Monday, along with 200 other hilltown residents, some Internet service providers and local legislators, to witness Gov. Deval Patrick sign the bill into law.

'The governor's desk is right here in Goshen now,' Patrick joked.

The legislation is called the Massachusetts Broadband Incentive Fund, and its priority is to help 32 communities that have no high-speed telecommunication -- virtually all of which are in western Massachusetts and mostly in the Pioneer Valley Connect broadband group, according to Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington. Of those, 10 are in Franklin County. The bill's second priority is to provide service to 'under-served' towns, which includes another 14 in Franklin County.

'No other place in the state has such an aggregation of communities that are unserved or only partially served,' Kulik said recently.

The bill would enable the state to issue bonds as an incentive to private investors to develop high-speed telecommunication infrastructure in areas where more sparse population or topography have made it less economically attractive, thereby making broadband service more affordable and available in every community.

Six months ago, about 160 residents from Buckland and Shelburne attended a public hearing and urged Comcast Cable Co. representatives to expand broadband throughout both towns. Many spoke of how their home-based businesses, bed and breakfasts and even educational opportunities were hindered by not having Internet service.

But according to reports put together by the Buckland and Shelburne cable advisory boards, the cost of laying cable was said to be between \$20,000 to \$40,000 per mile.

The Broadband Incentive Fund requires the state to create a Massachusetts Broadband Institute, to be located at the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative in Westborough. A board of directors will be formed, with five members assigned by the Legislature and four appointed by the governor, and they are to develop a detailed operating plan.

Pat Larkin, director of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's John Adams Innovation Institute, said the broadband institute will hire a small staff to manage the fund and to 'reach out to stakeholders for insights into optimum broadband solutions, for what is the best expenditure of the dollars.'

Larkin said requests for proposals will be put out for service providers. 'The goal is to reach as many unserved citizens as is possible,' he said. 'It is the intent of the Mass. Broadband Institute to use the money to get providers to invest -- so we can reach further and provide leverage to get (access to) as many citizens as we can. We're going to try our hardest to expend the full resources and get long-lived assets to address the problem,' said Larkin.

Larkin noted that the \$40 million is a one-time expenditure and it must be used within 36 months.

When asked if the local communities without Internet can be wired for service within three years, the executive director of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Linda Dunlavy, candidly said: 'I don't know. With looming public investment, will private companies be motivated to make a bigger investment?'

'What I've been saying is, there was a promise we'd have broadband access by 2010,' said Dunlavy. 'Whether that's actual, I don't know. Will we be on our way? Yes we will.'