



The Republican.

Rural towns seek high-speed link

Saturday, July 12, 2008

By **DAN RING**
dring@repub.com

BOSTON - Robert A. Brooks, of Leverett, says that high-speed Internet service is a must for his hometown and other small communities in Western Massachusetts.

Leverett is among 37 towns in Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin counties with no high-speed Internet or only limited service by way of telephone lines or cable, according to a survey completed last year.

That puts students from Leverett at a competitive disadvantage, and it hurts people with home businesses. It also means that many people decide against moving to the town, said Brooks this week.

He is chairman of the Shutesbury-Leverett Broadband Committee.

"Until we have 100 percent coverage in our towns, we will be a staunch advocate of pushing for that," said Brooks, 46, a software engineer who lives in a tiny section of Leverett that does have high-speed Web service.

After years of criticism, state government and private industry are moving to close the "digital divide" in rural sections of Western Massachusetts.

Verizon Communications Inc. of New York is currently working to expand high-speed Internet to 24 communities in Western Massachusetts that currently have no broadband access to the worldwide Web.

The communities include Blandford, Colrain, Cummington, Florida, Goshen, Heath, Leverett, Montgomery, Tolland, Westhampton and Worthington, according to Verizon.

Verizon expects high-speed service to be available to 70 percent of its customer lines, on average, in the 24 towns. No service is yet available, said a spokesman.

On Beacon Hill, state legislators are nearing passage of a bill that would provide \$40 million worth of bonds to expand high-speed Internet.

The bill, submitted by Gov. Deval L. Patrick last October, would pay for infrastructure such as fiber, wireless towers, conduits, and other equipment needed for high-speed Internet access.

The bill creates a broadband institute, with a nine-member governing board, to oversee spending on high-speed Internet.

The equipment would be publicly owned and leased to companies such as Verizon or nonprofit groups.

Statewide, 63 communities in the state have only partial access to broadband service, and 32 have no access. These numbers include the communities in Hampden, Franklin, and Hampshire counties.

Previously, cable television companies and Verizon have declined to provide high-speed service because homes in certain towns and rural areas are too spread apart to make it economical.

"Our current expansion in Western Massachusetts complements the governor's plan, which we have supported from the beginning and testified in favor of," said a Verizon spokesman in an e-mail.

The Senate voted 37-0 on Thursday to approve the bill. The state House of Representatives voted 144-0 on June 30 to approve it.

The bill needs at least one more level of approval in each house. It is expected to be sent to the governor before the end of formal sessions on July 31.

©2008 The Republican

© 2008 MassLive.com All Rights Reserved.