

## THE RECORDER

### High-speed coming to hilltowns?

By Jeremy Dirac, Recorder Staff

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If you can't get high-speed Internet now, you may be able to within a year.

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

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

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, you'll have 60 percent of Verizon's customers covered, while in others, 90 percent, Santoro said although he didn't have the actual limits.

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, at \$13 per month for 1.5 mbps, and \$40 for 3 mbps, Santoro said.

For many, not having high-speed Internet has been a development issue.

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 not being able to sell homes or rent out apartments in regions that don't receive high-speed Internet, of college students who can't do homework at home 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 a town meeting, it spent \$18,500 simply 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," Rowe resident B.J. Roche, who makes her living as a writer, had said at a

hearing last fall with the Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Cable. "The jobs are gone," she said, "where are they going to come from?"

Last year, about 65 Rowe residents petitioned the DTC, not for high-speed Internet, but for general phone service relief, with residents complaining of phone outages, phones cutting out, cutting into other people's conversations, and 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 (DSL) 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," Verizon region president for Massachusetts and Rhode Island Donna Cupelo said, 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," Cupelo added.

Verizon's \$200 million investment drew praise from state legislators.

"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," state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, D-Amherst, said. "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.

"As the Legislature moves forward with Governor 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," state Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, said.

"This not only helps our families and communities to connect to the Internet, but is a great leap forward in our ability to bring new business opportunities to western Massachusetts," Rep. Dan Bosley, D-North Adams, said.

Meanwhile, some, like the majority of 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.

A broadband forum for western Massachusetts is scheduled for Saturday in Northampton, to look at government perspectives. It is being held at the Clarion Hotel from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

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