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Broadband bill to bring \$15M to unserved area towns

By Richie Davis, Recorder Staff

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Area legislators are hailing a \$15 million measure now awaiting the governor's signature that they say brings area towns "inches away" from broadband access for everyone.

The funding that cleared the House unanimously and was then approved by the Senate, is part of a \$40 million broadband bill designed to bring high-speed Internet service to underserved and unserved communities across the state, which includes much of Franklin County.

The bill would set up a state funding mechanism to attract private telecommunications companies to invest in serving 63 towns where there is only partial broadband service, and 32 in western Massachusetts with no access at all.

According to Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, D-Amherst, \$15 million of the fund would be dedicated to bringing broadband to the unserved communities, 10 of which are in Franklin County.

"We're making progress," Rosenberg said. "The Legislature recognizes that broadband access will be an important component of our future economic prosperity."

He said he remains committed to see it made available "in every corner of the state."

Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, said, "for a long time, the people in my district have been patiently waiting for this initiative. Today, we are just inches away from access for everyone, bringing economic and social equity to small towns."

Since Gov. Deval Patrick initially proposed the legislation and has made it a priority, Kulik said, "it would be a great surprise if he didn't sign this." He has 10 days to do so.

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.

Rep. Denis Guyer, D-Dalton, who amended the legislation to concentrate on unserved communities first, said, "Broadband providers simply do not have the financial incentive to build out their systems in these parts of our state. Without the public investment provided by this legislation, these communities would have been forced to wait indefinitely, and would fall further behind."

Bernardston and Whately are the only towns in Franklin County shown by the MTC last June as having two broadband providers.

Verizon

Meanwhile, Verizon says it is "on or ahead of schedule" in a deployment of high-speed Digital Subscriber Line service to 24 western Massachusetts communities this year, including six Franklin County towns.

The company plans to announce in the next couple weeks that it is ready to deploy the service in "the first batch of communities," and it is "significantly" expanding that service in Shutesbury, according to company spokesman Phil Santoro.

The service, available to an average of 70 percent of Verizon customers in each of the towns, will give Internet users the ability to download at speeds of up to 3 megabits per second, 53 times faster than dial-up.

Kulik said he believes the state initiative will help "backfill" the rest of the remaining 30 percent of the expanded Verizon towns, which also include Colrain, Heath, Leverett, Leyden, Monroe and Rowe.