

# The Berkshire Eagle

## Senate OKs bill for 'Net access

**The governor is expected to sign the legislation, which will expand broadband technology to areas that have been unserved or underserved.**

By Matt Murphy, Eagle Boston Bureau

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BOSTON — A major public investment in expanding broadband Internet access to unserved communities in Western Massachusetts cleared the Legislature yesterday, carrying the possibility of finally linking the region to basic technology enjoyed by businesses and residents in virtually every other corner of the state.

The state Senate unanimously approved legislation creating the new Broadband Institute that will be given \$40 million to work with private providers to help underwrite the cost of building the infrastructure needed to connect the entire region to high-speed Internet. The goal is to wire all 32 unserved communities with high-speed broadband in the next two years.

Gov. Deval L. Patrick, who originally filed a \$25 million proposal, has been extremely supportive of the measure and will have 10 days to sign the bill.

"It opens up places for business that otherwise weren't open. Small communities that people might want to take advantage of the quality of life can now live there and run their small businesses from home or open downtown and connect not just to the local circles but the global economy," said Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, the freshman Pittsfield Democrat who has championed the bill on Beacon Hill.

There are 32 communities in Massachusetts without access to high-speed Internet, all but one located in Western Massachusetts. Another 63 cities and towns are considered underserved.

Berkshire County alone is home to 14 communities unserved by a high-speed Internet provider, forcing government and businesses to rely on slower, less reliable dial-up connections.

State leaders have been trying for almost two decades to encourage providers like Comcast and Verizon to wire the region, but market factors limiting the potential for profit and geographic obstacles have left places in the county a black hole to modern Internet technologies.

'Long time coming'

"It's been a long time coming," said Don Dubendorf, president of Berkshire Connect, which has been working to expand access in Berkshire County. "We have been relegated by the operation of private markets to second-class status and that has all sorts of impacts on public and private life. This is straightforwardly a necessity in this century, like public sewer systems and public highways."

The \$40 million will be used by the state to make investments in broadband infrastructure and leverage investment from private providers to expand to unserved cities and towns.

Downing said since the start of discussion, the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development has had conversations with more than 25 local and national providers with interest in the program and hopes to use the potential competition to provide consumers with affordable rates.

"It's an exciting time, and exciting possibly because we have the ability to challenge these providers to show us what they have and get the best deal for taxpayers," Downing said.

Verizon to upgrade service

Verizon, in February, announced that it planned to invest \$200 million to upgrade its high-speed service and expand to 23 Western Massachusetts communities.

Although the plan was not directly related to Patrick's legislation, company officials said they looked forward to working closely with the administration to expand further into untapped markets.

Verizon said it would expand its DSL Internet service — which is carried over phone lines — to the Berkshire towns of Becket, Sandisfield, Florida, Hancock, New Ashford, New Marlborough and Windsor.

At the same time, 24 new communities, including Otis, Stockbridge and West Stockbridge, are scheduled to receive upgrades to their service, doubling the speed of data travel for many customers.

"That is the power of us putting money into it. Comcast is also scrambling to try and put more money in," said Rep. Daniel E. Bosley, D-North Adams, chairman of the House Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies. "There are areas where the market doesn't work and that's why it's entirely appropriate for the state to step in and make this kind of investment."

'This is extraordinary'

Both Bosley and Dubendorf said they hope the state can also get a return on their investment and private partnerships so that the Broadband Institute will be able to continue improving service and ensure Western Massachusetts cities and towns don't find themselves again relying on obsolete technology 10 years from now.

"I couldn't be happier. This is extraordinary. But at the end of the day, I don't ever want us to have to say this is good enough for Western Massachusetts," Dubendorf said.