

The Republican.

Bringing WMass up to (high) speed

Monday, July 14, 2008

Editorial

If you live in a rural Western Massachusetts town, you know the way to the nearest interstate highway. It may not be just around the corner, but one road leads to another, and before you know it, you can be on the way to Boston. Or New York. Or cities and towns much further afield.

But if you live in many rural Western Massachusetts towns, there is no way at all for you to get access to the information superhighway. High-speed Internet access, which is essential for anyone looking to function in today's interconnected global marketplace, is simply out of reach. Ask for directions, and you'll be told: "You can't get there from here."

In Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin counties, there are 37 communities with no high-speed Internet access - or with broadband reaching just a part of town. This puts students at a real disadvantage. It makes running a small business virtually impossible. It scares away some people who might otherwise move to town.

Thankfully, that is about to change, with legislation that will aid in establishing a private-public partnership to bring Western Massachusetts up to speed. The state House and Senate have already given initial approval to a bill that would provide \$40 million for infrastructure for high-speed Internet. Lawmakers are expected to finalize that legislation before month's end. Private companies such as Verizon and Comcast will then be able to build on that to get more and more customers online.

This will be a boon to everyone.

The Internet is not some luxury, some bit of wizardry reserved for gadget freaks. It is an essential part of our increasingly interconnected world.

Say you are living in Leverett, a couple of hours from Boston in your car, but cut off from the rest of the world on your computer. Soon enough, the second half of that equation will change, with even Beijing being just a mouse click away.

Welcome to the new millennium.