

Getting Wired

Can the state help rural communities in Massachusetts bridge the digital divide?

By Chris Collins

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First Franklin District State Rep. Steve Kulik (D-Worthington) knows all too well the impact the "digital divide" can have on the quality of life of a Western Mass. resident.

"I have the dubious distinction of being the only legislator in this state who lives in a community without broadband service," Kulik said. "I know firsthand the frustrations people in this region live through every day."

In what is truly one of the great travesties of the electronic age, there are 95 communities west of I-495 which have been identified by the commonwealth as "underserved" when it comes to access to broadband Internet technology. Of those 95 cities and towns, 32 have no service at all, leaving 220,000 households and 25,000 businesses without access to the basic technology which is largely taken for granted in more densely populated areas.

All but one of the towns without broadband is in Western Mass., and five of them—Worthington, Goshen, Leverett, Wendell and New Salem—are in Kulik's district. Seven other district towns have only limited coverage, forcing 12 of the 16 towns in Kulik's district to deal with a problem which, he says, puts this region at a distinct economic disadvantage in a world increasingly dependent on technology to move commerce.

"There was a study done recently by M.I.T. that showed that communities that do not have broadband have lower property values and lower rates of employment," Kulik said. "This cuts across every segment of the population."

But after years of inaction by Republican administrations, it appears the commonwealth is finally taking steps to address the problem. Governor Deval Patrick has filed a \$25 million dollar bond bill, the goal of which is to bring Broadband service to all Massachusetts communities by 2010.

The concept is fairly simple. Massachusetts will use the money to build new broadband infrastructure, which, in theory, will attract private companies willing to come through with additional monies to extend service to all underserved communities. The state money, so the theory goes, would remove some of the logistical and financial impediments that have so far prevented companies from extending infrastructure to rural areas (they would have to spend millions of dollars they would have little hope of ever recouping).

"This has been tried in other states, and in some cases, it attracted two, three and four times the initial investment," Kulik said. "We already know that \$25 million alone is not going to be enough to do all the work we need to do, so there's going to have to be some private investment."

Kulik said the state has no intention of becoming a broadband "provider" under this agreement.

"It would stay in the private market," Kulik said. "It's not all that different than the setup that was used to bring telephone and telegraph service to rural areas."

Kulik said the bond bill will also establish a "Broadband Institute" within the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. That organization would be composed of gubernatorial appointees and heads of agencies, and would be responsible for issuing requests for proposals to interested broadband providers and handling the management of the technical aspects of the plan.

Kulik said the bill is likely to encounter little opposition, and is being fast-tracked for passage later in this session. But not everyone is completely sold on the idea, most notably Free Press, a national advocacy organization which has been advancing the cause of "net neutrality"—a policy that prevents Internet providers from speeding up or slowing down Web content based on its source, ownership or destination.

"As it stands now, this bill does not contain any language to protect consumers from corporate abuse and discrimination," Free Press Managing Director Kimberly Longey said.

"For too long, citizens of this region have been deprived of the tremendous social and economic benefits that transformative broadband technology can offer," Longey added. "The introduction of this bill is the best chance of turning our hope into reality, but because it allocates \$25 million in scarce taxpayer resources, it is paramount that the money be spent wisely."

Longey said the bill also does not ensure that service in Western Mass.—once it is provided—will be on par with the quality and speeds available in eastern Mass., and it does not include funding that would serve the broadband needs of the 63 underserved communities, a fact Kulik is acutely aware of.

"The goal is to get [all underserved] communities covered, but the priority, at least initially, has to be communities that have no service," Kulik said.

Longey also says Free Press is concerned that the private investment this initiative is dependent on will ultimately be there at the end. And if it is, she says, the bill does nothing to prevent consumers from winding up at the mercy of a lone broadband provider who may not necessarily have the region's best interest at heart.

"Because of the sheer volume of investment necessary to bring broadband to Western Mass., this bill will likely result in the establishment of a single broadband provider serving each community—a monopoly," Longey said.

"It is for this very reason that the bill must contain consumer protection provisions that will ensure that any company that ultimately delivers high-speed Internet to Western Massachusetts will do so without censoring content, limiting access or requiring purchases of 'bundled services' that consumers don't want or need."

Kulik says the Legislature is concerned about the same issues, while also pointing out that current Broadband providers doing business in other parts of the state are also not operating under "net neutrality" rules.

"These are important issues being debated in Washington, and we're very mindful of those concerns," Kulik said, "But it's important that we not tie the hands of this Broadband Institute, and put these communities who aren't being served at an additional competitive disadvantage."

Free Press and other organizations will have a chance to chew over these and many other issues at A Broadband Forum for Western Massachusetts, a day-long conference on March 1 at Northampton's Clarion Hotel and Conference Center. The event is sponsored in part by the Western Mass. Beacon Hill Delegation, Congressman John Olver, Sen. John Kerry, the Mass. Office of Housing and Economic Development, the Berkshire and Pioneer Valley Connect organizations, and the Massachusetts Technology Council's John Adams Institute.

Kulik says though he looks forward to the discussion, it's doubtful that anything said there will quell the impatience of hinterland residents who for too long have gotten the short end of the stick known as the digital divide.

"People want this service yesterday," Kulik added. "We're losing jobs, we're losing residents and we're putting our businesses and governments at a competitive disadvantage, and we can't let our work on this national access debate delay us any further in moving toward bringing this much-needed technology in rural Massachusetts."

More information on Saturday's conference is available at http://www.masstech.org/invite/broadband12_07a.html.