

Broadband Initiative Clears a Big Hurdle

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Tuesday March 15, 2011

PITTSFIELD -- A state initiative to bring broadband to remote and underserved communities in northern and western Massachusetts announced Monday that it received federal approval integral to beginning construction.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration rubber-stamped an environmental assessment of the Massachusetts Broadband Initiative's (MBI) efforts to set up a fiber-optic infrastructure. The "Internet backbone" is slated to bring the possibility of high-speed Internet and cable by 2013 to areas including the Berkshires, the majority of municipalities in which there is limited or no broadband access.

"Broadband really is a fundamental utility, much like electricity," said Judith Dumont, director of MBI.

Most of the 1,338 miles of fiber optic cable will attach to already existing utility poles, but in some cases -- to cross roads, railroads and bridges -- lines will need to go underground. The approved environmental assessment included measuring the impact of the fiber-optic network on sensitive environmental areas as well as historic buildings and districts.

MBI's proposed fiber-optic network is what's called "open-access, middle-mile," meaning that wires will go into the center of every town, and that any service provider can then utilize the connection to bridge the "last-mile" gap between town center and residences and businesses.

While MBI hailed the federal approval as the first step to almost total broadband access in western Massachusetts, some of MBI's community liaisons in the Berkshires cautioned that the main network does not yet guarantee that homes and businesses will actually get plugged in.

Jim Lovejoy, the community liaison for Mount Washington, said he was excited to see the process moving forward, but reiterated his concern that, without providers who are willing to go that "last mile," broadband might still elude the 150 residents of his town.

"If they complete their project in 2013, there's no real plan for Mount Washington residents to get service. What's going to happen, in my humble opinion, is that it's going to be just like it is now," he said. "Your Comcasts and your Verizons and Time Warners and cable providers, they only hook up in areas where it's in their financial interest."

Lovejoy is not alone. A group called Wired West has formed to add on to MBI's work, focusing on ensuring that the "last mile" happens around western Massachusetts.

"We're not looking to overlap MBI's efforts," said Wired West spokeswoman Monica Webb of Monterey. "We're looking to create a last-mile solution that will ... position our region for the future."

Dumont, the MBI director, said that part of the federal grant funding the project is set aside for incentivizing providers to finish the "last mile," and that MBI plans to continue to seek more grants to do so. She emphasized that she doesn't consider MBI's job done until towns see connections.

Nonetheless, Dumont added, she can appreciate the level of skepticism from people like Lovejoy, who have been lobbying for rural broadband for more than a decade without success.

"They want to see the middle-mile built. They want to see the last-mile come to the towns that have been overlooked for so long," she said.

MBI intends for the fiber-optic project to shrink the digital divide not only by providing rural access but also by making already-existent service more affordable and widespread for populations like the elderly and low-income, Dumont added.

MBI designates 21 out of the 32 municipalities in the Berkshires as either unserved or "underserved" -- meaning that less than 50 percent of residents have broadband access. Those towns are Alford, Becket, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Egremont, Florida, Hancock, Hinsdale, Monterey, Mount Washington, New Ashford, New Marlborough, Peru, Richmond, Sandisfield, Sheffield, Savoy, Tyringham, Washington, West Stockbridge and Windsor.