

Western Mass. Broadband Initiative Gets \$72M Boost

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BOSTON — A proposed 1,100-mile broadband network will connect more than 120 offline communities in Western and north central Massachusetts thanks to \$72 million in state and federal grants.

It was announced today that the Massachusetts Broadband Institute will receive \$45.5 million for investment in broadband technologies through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Broadband Technology Opportunity Program, which is funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The investment represents the culmination of years of work between the governor's office and state Legislature in cooperation and consultation with federal officials. The announcement was made by U.S. Sen. John Kerry and U.S. Reps. John Olver, Richard Neal and Jim McGovern.

"Today, in the four western counties of Massachusetts, there is only one city block in the city of Springfield that can house a broadband intensive business. This puts the entire region at a major economic disadvantage. I am thrilled to announce that with this award, MassBroadband 123 will change this," said Olver, in a statement announcing the funding. "Since the national downtrend in manufacturing, these four counties have developed a large percentage of small and home businesses. These businesses are currently dependent on dial-up, which severely limits their ability to compete."

On the state side, Gov. Deval Patrick said the state will match the federal grant with \$26.2 million to build MassBroadband 123 — a publicly owned, open access, middle-mile fiber network covering more than one-third of the state.

Services will be delivered by a network operator overseen by the MBI. MassBroadband 123 represents the 101 communities of Western Massachusetts and the 22 additional communities in north central Massachusetts it proposes to serve. The 1,100-mile network will connect these 123 communities and the 1,392 community anchor institutions that serve them.

MassBroadband 123 is expected to create almost 3,000 jobs — 1,435 from building and managing the network and 1,540 from economic development in these disadvantaged areas and the rest of the region.

Patrick and the Berkshire delegation pledged two years ago to work to bring broadband access to the mostly rural areas of Western Mass. by pushing through legislation that created the Massachusetts Broadband Institute and setting up

\$40 million in bonds to leverage infrastructure improvements. The backbone of the system will be I-91 that runs the length of the state from Connecticut to Vermont — most of the underserved communities lie on the west side of the highway.

"Expanding broadband access has been at the forefront of our economic development agenda since day one," said Patrick in the statement. "I cannot overstate the value of this project for the communities of Western Massachusetts that have gone without reliable high-speed broadband service for too long."

Access to broadband has been limited in the small and often mountainous towns of the Berkshires. Cable service may not be available, the mountains block the use of wireless towers and dial-up is practically prehistoric for the media-rich Web.

Nearly 50 towns have joined WiredWest to create their own municipally owned fiber-optic communities that will hook residential users into the I-91 central core; MassBroadband 123 will connect governmental entities — town hall, schools, libraries, fire and police — into the system.

The service area contains more than one million residents, over 44,000 businesses, at least 2,100 community anchor institutions (CAI), and 3,429 square miles. The middle-mile network will be within three miles of more than 98 percent of households, CAIs, and businesses. This will dramatically change the cost equation and service options for last-mile providers and allow for competitively priced residential and business-class broadband services.

"This wasn't easy and it didn't happen overnight," said Kerry in the statement. "I remember sitting with our state legislators and business leaders in 1998 talking about how to wire Western Massachusetts for the future. Some people said it was a pipe dream, and now we've proven them dead wrong. ... This is history-making. Broadband service is essential to the region's economic future. Our businesses and our kids will feel the legacy of this network for decades to come."