

Broadband plan closer to reality

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But 'backbone' will need home connections, too

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | July 9, 2010

It will take up to three years to build the new data network that promises to bring better Internet and telephone services to Western Massachusetts. But because the network will not connect directly to homes and businesses, the state must recruit commercial Internet providers to build "last-mile" connections to end users.

Yesterday, US Commerce Secretary Gary Locke traveled to Greenfield to formally announce a grant of \$45.4 million in federal stimulus funds to build a "backbone" fiber-optic network, as was revealed last week.

State funds will pay for the remainder of the \$71.6 million project, which will serve 123 municipalities in North Central and Western Massachusetts.

"This kind of shot in the arm to this region's economy could not have come at a better time," said US Senator John F. Kerry, who attended the announcement. "The region should start feeling the impact of the network within the next few months, particularly in terms of new jobs created," the Massachusetts Democrat said.

Judy Dumont, director of the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, the state-sponsored agency leading the project, said the backbone network will feature about 1,000 miles of new fiber, mostly hung from existing telephone and power poles.

In addition, the state will lease a 307-mile line between Boston and Ayer.

Under the terms of the federal grant, two-thirds of the project must be built by 2012, and the network completed in 2013.

The fiber backbone will provide high-speed data access at more than 1,300 public buildings, including schools, libraries, and police and fire departments.

The region's approximately 333,000 homes and 44,000 businesses won't get access immediately, however. The state is counting on private Internet companies to plug into the backbone and to begin selling network services to private citizens.

"This was always meant to be a public and private partnership," Dumont said. "The stimulus money and state money don't pay for the entire process, but it catalyzes the investment."

Some major Internet providers responded cautiously to the idea.

"We're always interested in exploring potential partnerships to serve as many Massachusetts residents and businesses as possible," said Doreen Vigue, a spokeswoman for [Comcast Corp.](#)

Phil Santoro, a spokesman for [Verizon Communications](#), praised the backbone project as "another positive step" in expanding broadband services in Massachusetts. "We look forward to continuing to work with the administration on the broadband expansion plan, to determine what additional role we might be able to play," he said.

A spokesman said AT&T Inc. was not currently holding discussions with state officials on selling access to the network.

Some smaller Internet providers seem eager to hook up to the backbone. A number of them participated in the state's application for the federal grant, saying that they would deliver advanced services once the backbone is built.

Sandy Bendremer, vice president of Galaxy Internet Services Inc., in Newton, said he has held discussions with the Broadband Institute about selling wired and wireless Internet services in Western Massachusetts.

"This network that's being installed out there kind of levels the playing field," he said, adding that it allows a small company like his to deliver the same kind of service offered in large cities by telecom giants.

Apart from building the last-mile connections, the state also needs private sector help to run the backbone network. Dumont said that while Massachusetts will own the completed system, "we will hire a vendor to run the network on our behalf, with our oversight."

The Broadband Institute will accept proposals until Aug. 6.

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