

Letter: Key Moment for Broadband

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WASHINGTON, MASS. >> For those of us in Western Mass. who have been without high-speed Internet service for far too long, our moment of truth is now at hand. A years-long effort to solve this problem will succeed or fail during town meeting season this spring.

Thirty-two towns, 11 of them in Berkshire County, are working through their cooperative WiredWest to create a regional fiber-optic broadband network to serve homes, businesses and other organizations. They've stepped up because the private sector has not, and will not.

Fiber towns

This means that the towns must take responsibility for funding the network. Authorization to borrow the necessary funds will come before town meetings. It's a lot of money for these small towns, and needs a two-thirds vote to pass.

Fortunately, there's a discount of about 35 percent available if they move forward. That's the contribution the state is prepared to make toward the project, thanks to Govs. Deval Patrick and Charlie Baker, and our legislative delegation.

For a town to become a "fiber town" as part of the network, it not only must borrow the money, but 40 percent of its households must sign up for service in advance and make a \$49 refundable deposit toward their first month's bill. The point is for people to show that they're serious about wanting broadband.

In early March WiredWest launched a campaign to sign up people. In the first month more than 4,000 households have done so, either by mail or online, and deposited more than \$200,000. People won't see service for two or three years, but they've put their money where their mouse is.

There's a very important reason for the 40 percent goal. At that "take rate" for customers, WiredWest can cover not only its operating costs, but the principal and interest payments of the towns as well. Some skeptics may say that's just a projection in a business plan. True, but WiredWest's financials have undergone as thorough a vetting, involving nationally recognized experts, as any other broadband project being planned anywhere in the country.

Other people may say, we don't need this fiber network, I'm satisfied with the DSL Internet connection I have at home from Verizon. DSL is delivered over existing and aging copper telephone wires. Verizon's Chairman and CEO Lowell MacAdams has said that in "areas that are more rural and more sparsely populated ... we are going to cut the copper off there." In other words, force people to use their more profitable wireless service. So when DSL goes away, what will you do if we don't build the network?

That's just one reason we need to plan ahead and make the fiber network a reality. Want high-quality, full-featured landline phone service? The network will do that. Want a reasonably priced package of popular TV channels without having to buy the bloated bundles from cable and

satellite? The network will do that. Want to watch the new online TV shows from HBO, Netflix and many more to come? The network will do that.

But first, towns must achieve their 40 percent sign-up and two-thirds vote. Then they can move forward together through WiredWest, which they control through the representatives they appoint to its board of directors.

Towns will own the network through what is known as an undivided interest in the whole. It's like being part of a regional school district, which owns its buildings. No one town can say, well, given the amount of money we put up, we own 10 classrooms and the high school gym.

That's the key to the fiber project. We're all in this together, because that's our best chance for success. For better or worse, for richer or poorer. To take advantage of economies of scale in building and operating the network, and to share the risk.

And of course there's a risk in any undertaking. But what is the risk of doing nothing? Watching our population continue to decline and our economic base erode. Who wants to live or work in a place without a good Internet connection?

Educational edge

The regional fiber network is our best tool for economic development. For keeping young people here after they graduate from our fine colleges and universities. For attracting families with young children, who will get a better education because increasingly kids will have to do more homework online.

WiredWest sent out about 20,000 mailers (printed in Pittsfield, keeping the money local) with information about the project and how to sign up. There's much more information and answers to your questions at wiredwest.net. But the time to hesitate is through. So sign up for service now, and show up at town meeting to vote for the borrowing authorization.

The choice we face in our moment of truth this spring is simple. Each of us must decide for ourselves, our families and our towns: to move ahead or fall behind.