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Map project aims to ID gaps in broadband access

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With broadband Internet access making its way to western Massachusetts at dial-up speeds, state officials hope a new mapping project will help determine which communities are the highest priority.

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs' Office of Geographic and Environmental Information has joined with the Massachusetts Broadband Institute to work on the four-month project.

The mapping will initially focus on the western part of the state, including Hampshire, Franklin, Berkshire and Hampden counties, where broadband coverage is least prevalent, according to the governor's office.

Through a $40 million act signed in August 2008, Gov. Deval Patrick's goal is to have high-speed broadband Internet access available across the state by 2011.

"I'm sure for many it would not be soon enough," Sharon E. Gillett, director of MBI, said in a phone interview, adding the mapping project will use $41,350 of the $40 million act. "I know how frustrating it can be."

A map created in June 2007, based on a survey conducted by the John Adams Innovation Institute, pinpointed areas with partial or no broadband coverage.

The new maps will update that survey and have a narrower approach to determine the broadband service level on individual blocks by showing where inventory broadband infrastructure exists and where gaps in broadband access need to be addressed, said the statement.

"It's like on Google Maps when you zoom in to get a closer look," said Gillett who was appointed director of MBI April 29.

Once the mapping is complete, work will begin in communities that are the most "unserved" or "underserved," said Emily Dahl, public information officer for the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

According to a briefing document of the Broadband Legislation Information packet published in 2007 on the MBI Web site, "Access to high-speed Internet is comparable in significance and economic potential to universal telephone service and the electrification of rural America in the 1930s. In today's world, any individual or community without broadband access is educationally and economically disadvantaged."

The document continues, "Empirical evidence has shown that the mere presence of broadband increases the growth rate of jobs by as much as 30 percent. In Western Massachusetts, for example, broadband availability could create roughly 5,000 jobs over the next 10 years ¿ [and] over $163 million in incremental direct tax revenue over the next 10 years."

Of the communities the Gazette covers, six were completely without broadband service - Cummington, Goshen, Leverett, Montgomery, Plainfield and Worthington - while another 10 - Chesterfield, Deerfield, Greenfield, Hadley, Pelham, Shutesbury, South Deerfield, South Hadley, Southampton, Sunderland - were considered "underserved" according to the 2007 map.

Changes since then, particularly the installation of DSL service through Verizon, have changed that landscape of service.

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Statewide, of 101 municipalities, 31 had no broadband and another 35 had limited broadband coverage two years ago.

"Increased broadband availability leads to improved health care, public safety, and public education services throughout Massachusetts," said the statement from the governor's office. "Access to broadband also stimulates economic growth, helps create jobs and increases property values."

This statement was based a report entitled "Measuring Broadband's Economic Impact" compiled by several college professors including Gillett, who was the principal investigator while teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Massachusetts is also competing against other states for federal support through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which provides $7.2 billion to improve broadband access nationwide, including $350 million for grants to states to "develop comprehensive broadband maps over the next two years," the statement said.

The act, which Gillett described as "a real game-changer," was part of a $787 billion federal stimulus package passed in February.

There are over 100 companies interested in partnering with state to expand broadband service to areas where, for now, the only ways to get on the Web are by dial-up or satellite connections, Gillett said.

She said the state will also talk with officials from town halls, libraries and other state agencies to determine which areas are in need of faster Internet service.

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