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Our Opinion: Critical votes on broadband coming for rural Berkshire towns

The Berkshire Eagle

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Rural Berkshire communities left out of the Internet explosion have an opportunity in the weeks ahead to catch up with 21st century technology. It is not an understatement to say their economic futures are at stake.

While the state made considerable advances during the Patrick administration in bringing cable broadband service to rural Western Massachusetts communities, completing the so-called "last mile" has proven difficult in many small towns. Cable giants like Comcast and Time-Warner can't be bothered because there is not enough money to be made from the few customers available in towns that in many instances have large geographic areas.

The Wired West Communications Cooperative stepped into the breach in 2010 and is now spearheading an effort to close those last miles. For this to happen, town meeting voters must approve bonding for their town's share of extending fiber-optic cable to the community or to the sections that lack it. Forty percent of households must sign up for service in advance and make a \$49 refundable deposit toward their first month's bill. If all this is done, the state will finance 35 percent of the project. The state Broadband Institute would build the network and Wired West would own and operate it, with input from representatives of each member town.

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Twelve Berkshire towns have scheduled or are considering a bond vote this town meeting season. The size of the investment, often more than \$1 million, is not inconsiderable, especially in hill towns facing economic challenges. The cost of not doing anything, however, will prove to be far higher.

Efficient, high-speed broadband service is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity. Realtors have reported that homes on streets in Berkshire towns stuck with dial-up or some other primitive service, if any, are automatically rejected by potential buyers (Eagle, May 1.) A recent letter writer from West Stockbridge told of losing a renter because of the lack of broadband access to the home. Without completion of these last miles, towns experiencing losses in population will likely see an escalation and won't be able to attract newcomers to replace those who left.

Families will understandably be reluctant to put down roots in a community where their children cannot

connect easily to the Internet to meet academic requirements.

Attracting new businesses without a regional fiber network will be difficult if not impossible. Without these new businesses, the departure of young people from the Berkshires will continue to escalate.

Ideally, the cost of the project will decline if state and federal financing can be found. The first steps have to be made, however, and we urge the affected Berkshire towns to approve bonding at town meetings, and we urge residents of those towns to sign up for the service in advance. In so many ways, these communities will be better for having broadband service. By the same token, they may stagnate without it.