

Barack Obama to propose \$45 million in stimulus funds for Western Massachusetts broadband expansion

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By Patrick Johnson

SPRINGFIELD – President Barack Obama will announce on Friday the awarding of \$45.4 million in funding to be used to expand high-speed Internet access to rural parts of Western Massachusetts and other parts of the state, the White House said.

The funding is part of 66 broadband projects nationwide that will be funded by a total of \$795 million in grants and loans that are part of the 2009 Recovery Act, also known as the stimulus package.

The Massachusetts funding is directed specifically toward infrastructure improvements needed to provide affordable, high-speed Internet access to businesses and residents in remote areas of Western Massachusetts, according to a statement issued by the White House.

Massachusetts will be required to put up \$26.2 million in matching funds.

In all, it calls for the installation of more than 1,300 miles of cable in Western Massachusetts, with a potential to reach an estimated 1 million people, 44,000 businesses and 700 community institutions. The project is also touted as a means to create hundreds of jobs and drive economic development in areas of the state still reliant on slow dial-up Internet connections, the statement said.

With so much of the worlds of commerce, government and information readily available online, a lack of high-speed internet leaves residents of less-populated areas at a disadvantage compared to the cities and suburbs.

Governor Deval L. Patrick, who has touted expanding broadband access to every corner of the state since becoming governor, issued a response hailing the White House plan.

“I cannot overstate the value of this project for the communities of Western and North-Central Massachusetts that have gone without reliable high speed broadband service for too long,” he said in a prepared statement.

He thanked the Obama Administration for including funding for Massachusetts, and thanked members of the state Congressional delegation for their work.

Patrick said he was looking forward to putting the funding to work immediately to allow rural portions of the state “can connect and take an active part in a 21st Century economy.”

Massachusetts in 2008 authorized \$40 million in bonds to being broadband expansion.

According to a recent survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the percentage of adults regularly using the Internet is around 70 percent.

But access to broadband drops the further one moves into less populated areas. In cities, 61 percent use broadband but in rural communities, it drops to 47 percent.

Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, who represents many of the communities that will be affected, said “this is extraordinarily good news” for the 123 communities in Hampden, Hampshire, Berkshire and Franklin counties lacking broadband.

“This will create jobs and help strengthen our local economy,” he said. Residents and businesses “will see their quality of life dramatically improved, and their towns will finally bridge the ‘digital divide,’” he said.

Michael J. Falk of Becket, a member of the town’s Broadband Committee, said the news was welcome in Becket which, like a lot of remote communities, has been left in the dust of the high-speed revolution.

Until a few years ago, the town relied entirely on slow dial-up access, he said. Verizon made a push to expand high-speed service a few years ago by installing DSL lines, he said.

He said half the town has DSL lines and half either use dial-up service or pay out the nose for satellite service.

DSL is much better than dial-up but it is still woefully slow compared to broadband cable, he said.

As a result Becket, he said, has gone from being unserved to under-served, but the end result is the same: Becket is still at an economic, educational and social disadvantage to other, more populated parts of the state.

“It’s horrendous. You can’t attract businesses to the community. Businesses of all types rely on high-speed broad band.”