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Speedy Internet coming to towns

Two of Windsor County's smallest towns may be getting broadband service.

It all depends on approval of pending grant applications.

The Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission applied for the broadband demonstration grant last month on behalf of the two towns.

"As a pilot project, the communities of Reading and West Windsor were chosen because of their limited access to high-speed Internet services with the prospect of additional service constrained by their topography and low population density," Thomas Kennedy, executive director of the planning commission, wrote in the application.

The Planning Commission sent a broadband interest survey to all residents of the two towns, Kennedy said. More than 150 households and 42 businesses expressed interest.

"In addition, the southern Windsor county region is an excellent location for broadband services because we can take advantage of the existing infrastructure on the top of Mount Ascutney, which would make proliferation to Springfield, Cavendish, Weathersfield, Windsor and Ludlow cost-effective in the long run," he said.

The cost of providing broadband service from Mount Ascutney will be in the \$32,000 range, Kennedy said. However, Fast Internet On Wireless Ethernet, based in Lebanon, N.H. — also known as FINOWEN — plans to contribute about \$32,000 to the project in the form of equipment, labor and expertise, he said.

The Planning Commission expects to provide \$4,000 of in-kind services, Kennedy said, including geographic information system services, meeting facilitation, meeting space and advertising.

Tessa Johnson, director of marketing for FINOWEN, said Wednesday the company plans to expand service from the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire into southern Windsor County within the next six months.

She said that the company uses computer software to generate coverage maps that take topography and tree coverage into account.

"It gives a fairly accurate representation of where we will get service and where we won't," she said.

Grant money will be used to purchase and install equipment, secure antenna space and "manage the network to fill in the shadows cast by hills and dense foliage in these two towns," Kennedy said.

Steven Plaustainer, president of Mount Ascutney Resort, said the idea was terrific.

"We are willing to help any way we can," he said. "I can't imagine anybody would not want to get it if they could."

Thomas Murray, director of telecommunications infrastructure for Vermont, said the state was working closely with broadband and cellular service providers and had made "good improvements" in the past year and a half.

"Cellular coverage is gradually getting better," he said. "Broadband is coming upwards of 80 percent of the state. We still have a ways to go, but we are making progress."

Murray said that the Agency of Commerce and Community Development received 17 applications for the broadband grant. The legislation allows up to five grants to be awarded and one must be in Rutland County and one in the Northeast Kingdom.

"The process we use is a preapplication and a formal application," he said. "About 10 communities made the cut for the formal application. Of those, we expect to fund five of them."

Murray said the formal applications are due by Oct. 22.

"We hope to have the selections made by the end of October," he said.

"I was delighted to hear that Reading and West Windsor were finalists in this process," said Sen. Matthew Dunne, D-Hartland, who was instrumental in bringing about the broadband grant program.

About a year ago, Dunne and Sen. Hinda Miller, D-Burlington, brought together a group of business people to discuss what kind of investment would best help job growth and entrepreneurship without comprising farm and forestland, he said.

"A number of recommendations came out of that discussion including the Brownfields legislation to redevelop abandoned industrial sites, seed capital funds for Vermont entrepreneurs and high on the list was high-speed Internet access in our rural communities," Dunne said.

As a result, legislation was passed that incorporated a number of those elements, he said.

"I advocated for resources to specifically incentivize broadband companies to provide high-speed Internet in communities that have little or no access to high-speed Internet and to encourage them to bring that technology to the last mile of the

municipality," he said.

As a result, the broadband demonstration grant program will support deployment in various parts of the state.

"The exciting thing for me is that not only will we provide our rural areas the same access to the information highway that urban entrepreneurs now have, but will also encourage innovation in rural broadband development through these demonstration programs," he said.

According to the legislation, the state will pay for one-time costs associated with bringing the high-speed Internet to the last mile. Usually, providers only go to the population centers, where they will have more customers, he said.

"What we are asking them to do is bring that kind of access to the areas that usually get left behind," he said. "Our hope is that the models that these demonstration projects generate can be used for companies to replicate in other towns across Vermont and perhaps across rural America."

Dunne said that the grants are up to \$50,000.

"Because high-speed Internet is so important now in competing in the global marketplace, access to high-speed Internet is the difference between a rural community having jobs and not," he said. "We knew we didn't have the resources to bring high-speed Internet to every rural part of Vermont, but we wanted to see if these kinds of grants would encourage experiments and new business models for delivering rural broadband."

Dunne said the service was also a "critical equalizer" for young people who do homework at home and for working parents who need opportunities for higher education online.

"It's critical to make sure that Vermonters have the same opportunities as people in the rest of the country," he said.

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