Berkshire Connect, Inc.

PIONEER VALLEY CONNECT

The Berkshire Connect, Inc. and Pioneer Valley Connect Response to the "Call for Solutions for Western Massachusetts" December 18, 2008

Introduction

For the last decade, Berkshire Connect, Inc., and Pioneer Valley Connect (the Connects) have been committed to creating an advanced telecommunications landscape that will provide affordable, reliable and redundant high capacity broadband services throughout western Massachusetts. As regional advocates for broadband equity, the Connects recognize that our goal can finally become a reality with Governor Patrick's passage of the Massachusetts Broadband Initiative (MBI) legislation in August 2008. The Connects are prepared to move from a role of primarily advocacy to a role in supporting the swift and efficient implementation of the broadband services in the region. The Connects are in an advantageous position to work in partnership with the MBI, other state partners, local partners and providers, to expedite implementation and achieve success.

Overview of Past Experience

Individually, the Connects have been diligently trying innovative ways to resolve the broadband access problem. Beginning in the late 1990s, leadership in Berkshire County recognized their challenging circumstance of having a single incumbent provider, high costs and inadequate services. Incorporated in 2000 as 501(C)6 non-profit, Berkshire Connect Inc. pioneered a facilities-based, demand aggregation model that solved the T1 problem for businesses, schools, hospitals, and non-profits in the region. This model brought both competitive pricing and new infrastructure to Berkshire County. Berkshire Connect was recognized nationally for creating a unique relationship with the telecommunications industry that was beneficial to T1 consumers, providers and the region at large.

Inspired by Berkshire Connect, Inc., Franklin Connect was launched in 1999 to address the T1 and sub-T1 broadband access problem in Franklin County. At the request of neighboring communities in Hampshire and Hampden Counties, this effort grew to become Pioneer Valley Connect in 2003. Pioneer Valley Connect conducted its first demand aggregation effort in early 2002. Despite a successful contract negotiation with a national telecommunications provider, Pioneer Valley Connect did not enter into a relationship in anticipation of the imminent telecommunications collapse at that time. A renewed effort in 2004, selected Crocker Communications, a locally owned and operated ISP and CLEC, as a "Preferred Provider" due to their reasonable pricing and commitment to expand infrastructure in the region. Both of these efforts successfully expanded broadband options throughout the western Massachusetts region, but did not result in ubiquitous access.

Berkshire Connect, Inc.
75 South Church Street, Pittsfield, MA 01201
Telephone: 413-496-9606
Web: www.bconnect.org

Pioneer Valley Connect
c/o FRCOG, 425 Main Street, Greenfield, MA 01301
Telephone: 413-774-1194 x101
Web: www.pioneervalleyconnect.org

In 2006, the Connects, working together, received a two-year grant from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's John Adams Innovation Institute (JAII) to address broadband access equity issues in Western Massachusetts. Using these funds, the Connects developed a model network, with a corresponding financial analysis, that would bring broadband access to the unserved citizens of the region. This modeling effort concluded that public investment, in partnership with the private sector, is required to fully bring broadband to all parts of western Massachusetts. Many of the elements of this study were reflected in the objectives of the state broadband legislation.

In addition to the private sector partnerships and public sector resource research, the Connects have emerged as leaders on the broadband issues of the region. The Connects have participated in state programs and projects, such as ensuring that excess conduit capacity was part of MassHighway's I-91 ITS & Conduit Asset Project. The Connects managed the state Department of Public Health's program for one-year broadband access to unserved town halls. They created the first database and map of broadband availability by municipality in the Commonwealth. Using JAII funds, they conducted a test of wireless technologies in rural areas to assess the effectiveness of these technologies and study potential partnership plans. The Connects have conducted numerous workshops and information sessions on the topic of broadband access. Working with many local residents and public officials, major employers, legislators, state officials and the provider community, the Connects have developed functional and lasting relationships with these stakeholders and are respected as an authority on broadband issues and as a partner for change. The experience and skills gained by the Connects over these years allows them to be in a position to offer distinct services that will support the MBI in achieving a successful outcome.

"Western Massachusetts" Connect

The Connects recognize that they need to be flexible and able to adapt to changing needs and conditions. They believe that this philosophy will be important as the MBI moves forward to meet its mission, and that they can be a valuable resource in this capacity. In that regard, the Connects recognize that to be most effective, Pioneer Valley Connect and Berkshire Connect must continue to work together seamlessly.

Presently, the Connects have resources from Berkshire Connect, Inc. and the John Adams Innovation Institute award, and are pursuing other grant resources. The Connects are staffed with a Business Manager, a Planner, and a Chief Technology Officer. The Connects are in the process of merging into a single non-profit entity advocating for the western Massachusetts region. The new entity will retain these positions through direct employment or contracting. The new entity will also create a new Board of Directors. It will continue to be the mission of the Connects to work towards ubiquitous broadband access in the region, and will approach its work with a comprehensive, regional perspective.

The Connects anticipate that direct technical assistance will be required at the local and regional level. Assuming that the MBI will not have the capacity to provide such

services, the Connects, either directly or through their established relationships with local Regional Planning Agencies, can provide this assistance to the MBI. The Connects are in a position to assure the success of the MBI in western Massachusetts, and are seeking the opportunity to work in partnership with the MBI.

Proposed Activities & Services

As an organization, the MBI has been crafted to be lean and efficient, and to make the best use of available staff and resources from partnering state agencies. The Connects believe that their valuable services and skills, and their in-depth knowledge of the region, can be a tremendous asset for the MBI as they seek to expedite the deployment and provisioning of broadband. The Governor pledged to have broadband available to all unserved citizens within three years. This ambitious goal can only be met with active assistance and participation by the region. The Connects are poised to offer that assistance. The services proposed by the Connects fall into the following general categories.

Technical Expertise

A significant resource the Connects offer is technical expertise in telecommunications and an in-depth knowledge of the western Massachusetts region, through the Connects Chief Technology Officer, Chip Brodeur. Mr. Brodeur's technical expertise is a result of 40 years of experience in the telecommunications industry. As the CTO for the Connects, Mr. Brodeur developed the sub-regional network design and conducted the financial analysis that clearly proved that public funding subsidy was required to fully bring broadband to western Massachusetts. He created the first comprehensive database of broadband availability in the region. He was one of two technical experts in the Connects Beta Test Program testing wireless technologies. Mr. Brodeur has helped to create and implement fiber networks and systems for area colleges and municipalities, and has assessed the capabilities and network designs of multiple small providers. With the knowledge, experience and established relationships within all levels of the telecommunications industry, Mr. Brodeur, as CTO for the Connects, will be available for the following activities.

Activities:

- Expert technical resource to assess proposed networks and technologies for western Massachusetts region.
- Access to knowledge of existing telecommunications infrastructure in the region.
- Understanding of the needs of businesses, institutions and local governments.
- Skills to conduct engineering surveys at the local level, including field surveying.
- Determine and assess the capability and the network proposals, and the financial assumptions of providers.
- Provide technical assistance to local municipalities to facilitate communication with providers.

Pre-Implementation Work & Special Projects

To ensure the swift, successful implementation of broadband infrastructure and services, communities must be prepared to receive it. Many of our small, rural communities have limited staff capacity to move forward special initiatives. Often the zoning in these towns is limited, but restrictive. The Connects and their Regional Planning Agency partners, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, have the expertise to provide direct technical assistance to municipalities. Whether it be working with communities to revise their zoning bylaws and regulations, as they find appropriate, to be more receptive to infrastructure deployment, or providing a regional perspective and support to municipal leaders negotiating with providers, or other situations as may arise.

Activities:

- Develop model zoning bylaws or revise bylaws, and assist with their passage at the local level.
- Assist towns in developing permitting procedures and identifying a single point of contact in the community.
- Creating mapping products of unserved areas, and municipally and state owned assets.
- Identify additional necessary tools and resources, and develop partnerships for their successful creation and implementation, as needed.

Outreach & Liaison Services

The Connects understand the importance of communication on this vital issue. The Connects have served as a conduit to receive and share information from a variety of stakeholders, and can serve a helpful liaison function. As part of the communication process, it is important to manage expectations while also supporting the forward momentum of the effort. Many residents, businesses and public officials feel considerable frustration from the lack of broadband access. As we all know, this is a vital issue. Broadband access is a necessity to operate in today's economy and is essential to promote education, health, public safety and local democracy.

Both Connects grew from grassroots efforts to address the broadband inequity problem in their respective regions. As these organizations have evolved, they have retained their function as a gathering point for ideas and efforts to address this problem. In the region, the Connects are acknowledged as the 'go-to' organizations on this topic. The Connects receive phone calls and emails on a daily basis from residents, public officials, local broadband group members as well as the private sector provider community about broadband access in the region. The Connects make every effort to maintain active websites with up-to-date information available to the public. The Connects issue a periodic e-news update sent to those who have expressed an interest in regional broadband efforts. The Connects have held, sponsored, or assisted in the facilitation of many workshops, information sessions, and trainings about broadband issues, technology and legislation. The role of information clearinghouse and

dissemination will be a critical component to MBI success and the Connects are a proven vehicle for that role.

Activities:

- Coordinate and sponsor information sessions.
- Collaborate with state and local organizations to conduct educational sessions that would assist in developing the demand market and technology adoption.
- Conduct public outreach.
- Information clearinghouse and manage local data, such as unserved locations address data.
- Liaison for local and state partners.
- Continue to utilize the website and email updates and alerts as a conduit to share information.
- Mediate and negotiate among private entities, state and local governments, and other stakeholders.
- Local point of contact to aggregate questions and comments for the MBI.

Administration Services

Jointly, the Connects have successfully administered nearly $5 million in public and private funds. The Connects have a successful track record working with private sector providers as well as the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. As a private non-profit, the Connects also have the ability to manage assets in confidence.

Activities:

- Provide financial and business management services, as needed, which is appropriate for grants, project accountability, and similar functions.

Conclusion

While other states have devoted funding to the issue of broadband access, Massachusetts is pioneering the approach to use public funds to leverage private investment. The Connects are prepared to participate and support the success of the MBI, and achieve a resolution to the broadband equity problem in the region. The Connects are presently and will continue to be a vital asset for the success of the MBI. The Connects are effective and helpful partners. With this proposal, the Connects seek to formalize their role with the MBI and the region. The Connects look forward to discussing shared objectives and creating a sustainable structure to support the MBI and the Connects joint goals.