

Mass. to receive \$45M from feds for broadband

Associated Press

July 2, 2010

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BOSTON

Douglas Trumbull and Michael Garfield-Wright love living and love running their businesses in the quiet hills of rural western Massachusetts, except for one thing: Internet access is limited to slow, unreliable satellite and dial-up connections.

"It's really a drag," said Trumbull, an award-winning photographic effects expert who has worked on dozens of movies including "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "Blade Runner."

"I am working on cutting-edge projects with huge amounts of video content, and we've had to drive into Great Barrington and sit down at an Internet cafe and upload files going out all over the world," said Trumbull, who left Hollywood in 1987 and settled in the tiny Massachusetts community of Southfield.

Garfield-Wright's company, Dancing Star LLC in Buckland, distributes organic energy bars all over the country, from small independent stores to Whole Foods Market.

"I'm dealing with the lead buyers of some huge companies, and the ability to communicate is really important," he said. He had to run his business out of the library in December 2008 when an ice storm knocked out power, and Internet access, for eight days.

Their problems could soon be a thing of the past.

Massachusetts is getting more than \$45 million in federal stimulus money to expand and improve high-speed Internet access in the largely rural western and north-central parts of the state, where more than a million people live. The move is designed to boost the economy, education and public safety.

The federal grant, along with more than \$26 million in state money, will be used to construct a "middle mile" network with more than 1,100 miles of new fiber that will connect nearly 1,400 "anchors," including town halls, police and fire stations, hospitals, libraries and schools. That in turn will make it more economically viable for the private sector to come in and connect homes and businesses.

Officials estimate it will create almost 3,000 jobs, about half from building and managing the network, the other half from economic development in the region.

"This is a critical initiative," said Trumbull, who has shot movies in the Berkshires, and envisions bringing more projects to the region. "We can create employment; we can create growth."

The system is scheduled to be completed in three years, although some communities may be online within 18 months, said Judith Dumont, director of the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, which will oversee the project.

Proponents say it will make communications in the event of emergencies easier and faster; it will allow more people to work from home; and it will make it easier for colleges to recruit topflight professors.

It will also make the often mundane business of running a small town more efficient.

Working without broadband access can be frustrating, Wendell Town Coordinator Nancy Aldrich said.

The accountant for the town of 900 can't even work out of the town hall because of the poor Internet access, she said. Town employees can't watch training videos or participate in webinars, and can't access critical documents.

"Sometimes someone sends me a large document, like a contract, and it simply won't open," she said.

Gov. Deval Patrick has made expanding broadband a central part of his administration's economic development agenda since his 2006 election, but the plan goes back well beyond that.

U.S. Sen. John Kerry said he remembers talking to state legislators in 1998 about bringing broadband access to the western parts of the state. Some thought it was nothing but a "pipe dream," he said.

"This is history-making," he said. "Broadband service is essential to the region's economic future. Our businesses and our kids will feel the legacy of this network for decades to come."