

## **\$45 million U.S. grant to boost Internet access**

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By JACK FLYNN

GREENFIELD - The top political figures in Massachusetts came to Greenfield Community College Thursday to announce a \$45 million grant to expand broadband access in Western Massachusetts.

The federal windfall will bring high speed Internet access to up to one million households and 50,000 businesses across the region, said U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, who joined Gov. Deval L. Patrick and three members of the state's Congressional delegation at the press conference.

"Dial up just doesn't cut it," said Locke, referring to the slow Internet connections still used in many rural communities in Pioneer Valley and the Berkshires.

The project, to be completed in two years, calls for installation of 1,300 miles of cable to homes, businesses, hospitals, libraries, government offices and other community institutions.

The project - part of a \$795 million national broadband initiative - is also designed to create hundreds of jobs and contribute to the state's economic recovery.

"This is a big funding deal," said U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, in a polite paraphrase of a remark by Vice President Joseph Biden's after the Obama administration's health care reform package won approval.

Also attending the event were U.S. Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., and U.S. Rep. John Olver, D-Amherst.

Locke said the lack of high speed Internet service places Western Mass. communities at a competitive and cultural disadvantage to eastern Mass. and the nation.

To complete the project, the state must kick in \$26.2 million; bonds to finance the matching funds were authorized in 2008. Currently, 123 communities in four western counties lack broadband service.

Patrick said the project was made possible by federal and state officials, the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, and residents and town officials who lobbied for better Internet access. Noting that the broadband project was one of his campaign promises four years ago, Patrick - who is up for reelection in November - said he hopes to celebrate completion of the project as governor in 2012.