



If you build it, will they come?

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This is the first of an occasional series of stories about broadband, or hi-speed Internet connectivity, and its development locally and around the state.

ARLINGTON - Even if it weren't an election year, the chances are excellent that residents of Vermont would be hearing a lot about broadband.

The term refers to hi-speed Internet transmission rates that are much faster than the ones achieved by connections established by "dial up" modems that use a dedicated telephone line. Broadband connections are constant, and always instantly available, and can get up to as much as 4 megabits per second, compared to the 256 kilobytes per second that is the maximum a dial up modem can get. With a transmission rate that is up to 15 times faster, all manner of new applications become available, from streaming video to Internet telephone calls. It's a whole new world.

Getting Vermont up-to-speed when it comes to broadband availability is seen by many business leaders, to say nothing of politicians, as one component of helping lift the state out of the economic doldrums. Just building the system, which involves laying out miles and miles of fiber optic cable will provide jobs. But the big payoff comes when the state has a hi-speed Internet backbone that is the equal of anywhere else, in terms of speed and accessibility, so residents and businesses can take part in the emerging 21st century economy.

Peter Shumlin, the Democratic candidate for governor, vows that if elected, he

will relentlessly push to ensure all Vermonters have hi-speed access by 2013. His opponent, Brian Dubie, calls for "world class wireless broadband infrastructure" in the 10-point economic plan he unveiled last month.

Over the past two months, broadband infrastructure and hi-speed connectivity to the World Wide Web have been much in the news. In July, a total of \$46 million came Vermont's way in the form of two federal stimulus grants to build fiber-optic networks to improve service to schools, hospitals and colleges. That was quickly followed a month later with another large dollop of federal stimulus money, \$117 million this time, given out largely to the Vermont Telephone company (Vtel), which will throw in \$30 million of privately raised capital to build a wireless broadband network across the state, one capable of bringing access, it is believed, to virtually all Vermonters.

Meanwhile, private companies are also scrambling to bring access to previously underserved areas. Fairpoint, the North Carolina-based telephone company that acquired Verizon's old landline business in 2008 and then promptly sank into financial difficulties that are still being resolved, is making high speed available in Peru, and may be poised to do the same in other nearby towns that include Sandgate and Jamaica.

But if you build the infrastructure, will they come? Will average, ordinary Vermonters want to use it?

That part of the broadband equation - getting people online and tapping into the potential applications and benefits of high speed Internet, is at the heart of an initiative currently underway in Arlington, Sunderland and Sandgate, led by the



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Vermont Council on Rural Development's "e-Vermont" community broadband project.

The council is a private, non-profit organization founded in 1992 and focused on supporting rural communities. The broadband project is a two-year initiative to help rural Vermont towns take advantage of the Internet, and is supported by a mix of private foundation money as well as a \$2.5 million federal stimulus fund grant.

In the case of Arlington, Sunderland and Sandgate, the project will likely involve four areas: education, business, government and libraries, said Philip Petty, eVermont's community director.

The three towns were one of 12 winners of a competitive grant process held by the rural development council earlier this year, which will provide for training and support to help bring the possibilities and applications of high speed broadband to their communities. A second round of winners is expected to be announced by Oct. 1, he said.

"It became clear that they (the three communities) had a definite need and they had an understanding of what eVermont's services were, and they were able to show past success with collaborative community projects," he said.

Working with a group of partners that includes the Snelling Center for Government, Digital Wish (a locally based non-profit organization that focuses on supplying schools with computer equipment), the Front Porch Forum, the Vermont Department of Libraries and the Vermont Small business Development Center), the eVermont project hopes to bring expertise and assistance to bear on boosting the services available across the four broad areas identified by local organizers and the rural development council, he said.

Sunderland currently doesn't have a town Web site. Arlington does, but it wants to add more features. Sandgate has a small unofficial Web site maintained by a private individual. Working with the Snelling Center for Government, the three towns could all see an upgrade, Petty said.

Similarly, small businesses that wish to take advantage of e-commerce opportunities but don't know how could get advise from the state's small business development center. The Martha Canfield Library could see equipment and service upgrades, as well as serve as a training and workshop center, Petty said.

While building infrastructure remain an issue not only in these three communities as well as across the state, that is not their main focus right now. Accessibility to high-speed broadband varies widely across the three towns, according to the Vermont Telecommunications Authority, a state agency established in 2007 to help improve broadband availability. In Sunderland, more than half the town has close to 100 percent coverage through a mix of providers, but that starts to tail off in Arlington and vanishes altogether in Sandgate, where virtually none of the approximately 300 residents has broadband service.

Building out the broadband accessibility is important, but just as important may be getting those who are unsure of what usefulness it has for their daily lives to explore it, said Gordon Woodrow, the chairman of the Sunderland School Board and one of the organizers of the local group that put together the winning grant.

"Once you get the wiring and the infrastructure, how will it make your life more productive and add value?" he said. "That's what every community has to figure out for themselves."

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A steering committee of the original organizing group has been formed and is now meeting with Petty and other representatives of the Vermont project to develop priorities. Last week, the group met in Arlington to flesh out plans for distributing netbook computers to students at Fisher Elementary School, as well as getting more local businesses familiar with Web options.

Over the next two or three years, a tremendous amount of money will be spent on broadband development, and Bennington County will be one of the areas in line to receive a major chunk of it. Engaging local citizens to take advantage of it will also involve some work, Petty said.

"I look at people using broadband as sort of like climbing a mountain - you have some people who don't want to make the climb, and others who don't think it's worth the effort," he said. "One of my roles is to help them climb that mountain, because when you get to the top it's amazing the number of different ways people can enrich their lives simply by using the Internet."

For more information about the eVermont project, go to the rural development council's Web site at vrural.org.

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