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Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

Grant to give rural Maine high-speed Web access

The new fiber-optic network will bring the promise of growth to more than 100 communities.

From staff and news services

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Gary Locke

A \$25.4 million federal stimulus grant announced Thursday will be used to build an 1,100-mile fiber-optic network connecting the far reaches of Maine, bringing high-speed Internet to thousands of people who can't get broadband service through cable or phone lines.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke visited the University of Maine on Thursday to tout the funding for the so-called 'Three Ring Binder' project, which represents a fiber-optic foundation for broadband Internet service connecting rural western, eastern and northern Maine.

"This project and the private investment it will spur has the potential to connect one-fifth of Maine households to this 21st-century Internet backbone," Locke said.

The Maine grant was one of 18 nationwide that were announced Thursday to expand high-speed Internet to communities that have little or no access.

The project will benefit Mainers like Jim Fisher, who designs and maintains Web sites for several nonprofits in his spare time.

He said there's no high-speed Internet in the part of Blue Hill where he lives, and his satellite-based service goes out in bad weather, forcing him to go "skulking" about town looking for a wireless Internet connection.

"I have to go to the library. I go to the town office – anywhere I can find broadband that's better than at home," said Fisher, senior planner of the Hancock County Planning Commission.

The project is expected to have a significant effect on economic development in the regions it serves. It will provide better access to the Internet for consumers and businesses, and large institutions will be able to tap into it directly to meet their data transmission needs.

The Three Ring Binder will be privately owned and operated. It will be the property of Maine Fiber Co., a new company that will offer access to its high-capacity fiber-optic network on an equal basis to all Internet and telecommunication providers interested in serving rural Maine. It will be overseen by the Maine Public Utilities Commission.

Great Works Internet of Biddeford is leading the project, which is a collaborative effort among several telecom companies, the University of Maine System and other institutions.

"We're thrilled that Secretary Locke and his colleagues saw the benefits of our project," said Fletcher Kittredge, founder and chief executive of GWI. "This project couldn't have won funding, however, if it didn't have the support of some forward-thinking public officials right here in Maine."

The work will be funded through a combination of the federal stimulus grant and private money. The project's total cost is estimated at \$32.5 million.

Robert Monks, a prominent Maine businessman and a board member of MaineToday Media Inc., owner of the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram, is one of the lead investors in the project. The other is Dwight Allison of Portsmouth, N.H.

Early work has already begun, and construction is scheduled to start in the spring. Part of the system could be ready to use by the end of 2010, with completion of the project expected within 2 1/2 years.

The project is called the Three Ring Binder because it will consist of rings of transmission lines in western, eastern and northern Maine. The network will act as an Internet superhighway, with feeder lines linking it to end users.

The proposal includes rules to prevent any company from monopolizing the capacity of the network. For instance, no carrier will be able occupy more than 25 percent of it.

The Three Ring Binder will pass through more than 100 Maine communities with more than 110,000 homes.

The project initially will create construction jobs, and will benefit Maine businesses and institutions in the long term, said Gov. John Baldacci. When completed, it will allow University of Maine students to take courses from other universities around the world, and doctors at Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor to diagnose patients hundreds of miles away.

"To realize opportunities and grow jobs, we need to ensure Mainers have access to the latest technology, including high-speed broadband connections," Baldacci said.

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