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In Our Opinion: Connect to compete

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New England was a pioneer in technology in the 20th century, home to major computer companies. Now, however, other regions are catching up - especially in the area of high-speed broadband Internet service.

Dial-up Internet service is generally unacceptable for academic institutions and businesses and often frustrating for the individual surfing the Internet simply for pleasure. Broadband is the wave of the future, but it isn't available everywhere in western Massachusetts. For several years, "hidden tech" businesspeople have pushed for broadband access in the Hilltowns from Leverett to Goshen.

There is good news on several fronts. Five Colleges Inc. has nearly completed a fiber-optic network connecting the campuses and opening up major research and communications for faculty, staff and students. Their network may be accessible to local municipalities in the near future.

In addition, Pioneer Valley Connect, a consortium of area businesses, has won \$12 million in federal and state funding to construct and run a major broadband pipeline along Interstate 91 from Connecticut to Vermont through the Pioneer Valley. Construction won't begin for another year but the pipeline should eventually bring broadband service to places like Leverett and Shutesbury as well as Franklin County towns on the western side of the Connecticut River. It is just a long time coming.

Meanwhile, residents of the Boston area are often surprised to find that their counterparts in rural areas don't have the same ease of Internet access. In fact, Boston itself is behind cities like San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles and Nashville. Philadelphia led the nation in providing WiFi (wireless fidelity) and New York is working on a similar effort.

New England is still far behind and needs to play catch-up fast. Projects like the Five Colleges fiber-optic network and Pioneer Valley Connect are great strides forward, but more needs to be done. This is a worthwhile concept that needs leadership on Beacon Hill as part of the economic stimulus bill, as well as leadership in the business community. New England and the Pioneer Valley cannot afford to continue to lag behind the rest of the nation in this critical mode of communication and data transport.

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