

The Berkshire Eagle

Faster Web delights town

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FLORIDA -- Through the efforts of a nonprofit technology initiative, wireless high-speed Internet service has finally reached this remote rural hilltown's busiest technology operation: Gabriel Abbott Memorial Elementary School. For several weeks now, teachers, students, secretaries and administrators have been discovering the delights of broadband, which they say is faster than their prior satellite connection. "It was pretty speedy, but not as speedy as this," said school secretary Jane Thoreson. "This has made a big impact throughout the school, and we're very excited," said Principal Gregory Betti, who was involved in the implementation plan with Berkshire Connect Inc. "From dealing with Boston and the Department of Education to students working on Spanish Web sites, it makes all the difference in the world."

There are 105 students and 27 staff members at the school now surfing the Web faster. Florida, a high hilltown of about 700 people, divided by a windy bluff on the Mohawk Trail, is one of three Western Massachusetts communities selected to receive rural broadband service through "Connecting Western Massachusetts," a project led by two independent technology organizations, Berkshire Connect and Pioneer Valley Connect Inc. The two organizations received a \$300,000 grant from Adams Innovation Institute, a division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, which supports technology-based economic development initiatives around the state. The two "connects" have spent \$52,000 of their grant funds to bring broadband to Florida, New Salem and Worthington. Florida's residents also are invited to use library computers in the building during certain hours. And for town residents with the right wireless access equipment on their laptops, the school's wireless signal floats out into the parking lot, so "car surfers" can log onto the open system. The town has implemented a few rules and recommendations for parking lot users -- don't transmit private personal or financial information over an open wireless system, don't litter the parking lot, don't use the Web to commit a crime -- but other than that, surf away. A few houses near the school also are picking up a signal -- one resident even has an antenna in her yard -- that was heretofore unavailable.

Until now, Florida residents, businesses, town offices and the school have relied on satellite technology or the drudgery of dial-up common to the remotest of communities. The town offices remain satellite customers until -- and if -- the new system is expanded. The new "Beta Test Program," as it's known in the three towns, will support the technology and service -- including monthly costs for an Internet T1 circuit -- for a year, according to Sharon Ferry, business administrator for Berkshire Connect. "If the town wants to continue it, they will have to pay for it," Ferry said. She and program manager Maggie Bergin said the monthly T1 connection cost is \$650, but the town -- and perhaps

the Northern Berkshire School Union -- may be able to negotiate a better deal for a longer-term contract.

Bergin said the chances of continuing the service are improved if more residents and businesses can be connected in the coming months. "These important tests will bring at least some connectivity to these three broadband-deprived areas and, in the process, help sort fact from fiction with regard to the claims made by vendors," said Donald R. Dubendorf of Williamstown, president of Berkshire Connect. "However, in the final analysis, our citizens must have sustainable services delivered over systems that can grow and adapt to the region's needs," he said. A third of the 101 municipalities in Western Massachusetts have no access to basic broadband technology -- such as DSL or cable modem connections -- or the access is spotty.

In Florida, Worthington and New Salem, the towns have a T1 circuit, at least two wireless radio nodes and multiple antennas. Gov. Deval L. Patrick has proposed a bill with \$25 million targeted to address rural broadband voids, to improve economic development, education, business and public safety.

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At a glance ...

What: Florida's open broadband access.

Where: Gabriel Abbott Memorial Elementary School and town library.

When: By appointment, or during library hours, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5 to 8 p.m.

School parking lot 'hot spot': 4 p.m. to 11 p.m., Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

Who: Town of Florida residents only.

Caution: Don't conduct private business via open 'hot spot' locations; enter passwords only into Web sites that include an 'SSL' key to ensure encrypted data.