

Monadnock region towns partnering for broadband

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By Damien Fisher Union Leader Correspondent Mar 14, 2021



A line crew with Consolidated Communications worked on the new fiber optic broadband internet network in Westmoreland.

Photo provided by Consolidated Communications

Jaffrey could be the next town in the Monadnock region to partner with a private company to bring high-speed internet to residents.

The town recently announced it picked Consolidated Communications as a partner on a \$1.2 million plan to bring in fiber optic internet service.

"It puts us in a very good position," said Jo Anne Carr, Jaffrey's director of planning and economic development.

Jaffrey's not alone in forging a public-private partnership, according to Rob Koester, senior vice president, consumer product management at Consolidated Communications. Koester's company has partnered with several Monadnock-area towns and plans to continue with more communities.

Koester said many companies cannot afford to build systems in rural communities because of the costs.

"Rural geographies are cost prohibitive," Koester said. "Us being able to form partnerships unlocked the keys to the kingdom."

The average cost to bring broadband service to a home in a rural community can be \$6,000 or more, he said. Many providers won't look to come out to towns like Jaffrey or Westmoreland or Chesterfield, but the towns are taking up the initiative on their own.

Carr said a recent law change is allowing municipalities to bond internet service upgrades, and that has opened the door to the partnership with Consolidated Communications. The company will build out and service the network, and manage payments, but the town will own the network under the deal, Carr said.

Koester said the pandemic has pushed many communities to get on board with high-speed internet. Carr said faster and more reliable internet service is critical for how people are living now. It will allow people to work from homes, start online businesses,

have remote learning for students, and make it easier for telemedicine appointments. Having a town-wide internet service will provide a draw for businesses, but also people looking to relocate.

“It does make us more competitive and more attractive,” Carr said. “It really will help our real estate values as well.”

Koester said Consolidated is underwriting the bond on the fiber optic network, and a monthly user fee will pay down the 10-year bond. Consolidated estimates an \$11 a month user fee on top of monthly service fees expected to be \$43 for a 50 megabits per second (Mbps) package, \$68 for a 250 Mbps package, and \$78 for a 1 gigabit per second (Gbps) package.

The fiber optic cable is capable of as much as 10 Gbps per second as more of the hardware is upgraded, Koester said. That means the service should be around for a while, capable of serving the expanding internet. Carr said the relatively short time-span for the bond, 10 years as opposed to 20 years, positions the town to pivot as technology changes.

“The sooner we pay the cost off, the sooner we can get ready for what’s coming,” she said

Consolidated first got broadband started in the Monadnock region in Chesterfield, and it recently completed similar projects in Dublin, Rindge and Westmoreland. Walpole, Harrisville and Mason are also coming on board, according to Consolidated.