

MUNICIPAL LIGHT PLANT VOTE FIRST STEP TOWARDS TOWN-WIDE HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

In Western Massachusetts towns, many have no access to affordable, high-speed internet at home, including those of us who are trying to run a home-based business. Our region's lack of universal access disadvantages our citizens and businesses in much the same way it disadvantaged our rural predecessors who couldn't get electricity. We miss out on employment and business opportunities, businesses and students cannot compete on a level playing field, and healthcare providers, schools, local governments and the citizens they serve, cannot reap the cost savings and improved services enabled by a robust, universal, high-bandwidth fiber-optic network.

Fortunately there's a local coalition addressing the problem. WiredWest is a community organization working to build a municipal, last-mile, fiber-optic network in Western Massachusetts towns unserved and underserved by high-speed internet, and create a long-lived asset that drives regional economic growth and quality of life for years to come. WiredWest consists of 47 Charter towns in Western Massachusetts that formally joined organizational discussions following votes at 2010 annual town meetings.

The group conducted extensive research on what type of governance structure would best accomplish the mission and serve the needs of constituent towns. The research was guided by local municipal counsel, project counsel, regional planning experts and a national community broadband consultant, and resulted in a recommendation to create a public cooperative comprised of member Municipal Light Plant (MLP) towns. The MLP option was advantageous for a number of reasons, particularly the expediency of using existing state legislation.

What is Municipal Light Plant Legislation?

Municipal Light Plant legislation is Chapter 164 of Massachusetts General Laws and was initially created over 100 years ago to enable towns to form their own electric departments. In the 1950s, community television was added to the legislation, and in the 1990s, the legislation was amended so towns could also engage in the provision of telecommunications services. There are currently about 40 towns with operating MLP departments in the Commonwealth today.

What are we voting for?

We're voting for our town to form a Municipal Lighting Plant (MLP) department. If passed with a two-thirds majority vote of voters present, at two town meetings, two to 13 months apart, this allows our town to join the WiredWest Cooperative, which will undertake the capitalization, buildout and operation of a municipal fiber-optic network in participating Municipal Light Plant towns.

Warrant Article:

To see if the Town will vote to authorize the Board of Selectmen to take all necessary and appropriate action to establish and to maintain, in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 164 of the General Laws and in accordance with the rules, regulations and orders of the Department of Public Utilities and the Department of Telecommunications & Cable, a municipal lighting plant for all purposes allowable under the laws of the Commonwealth, including without limitation the operation of a telecommunications system and any related services, or to take any other action relative thereto.

What are the Town's roles and responsibilities?

The Selectboard can choose to oversee its MLP department themselves or appoint a three to five member board. This group is responsible for appointing a manager, making decisions around the town's participation and representation in the WiredWest Cooperative (WWC), and filing annually with the State.

Creating the MLP incurs no cost to the town. There does not need to be a town "plant," nor does the town need to engage in the provision of electricity. If a town joins the WWC, there will be a membership fee of not more than \$1,000 per town. Participation in the WWC is voluntary, but a town's decision to leave the WWC after the point of project financing will be determined by the type and terms of the financing.

What's Next?

All towns that have established MLPs by June 30, 2011 will be invited as founding members of the WiredWest Communications Cooperative. Representatives from these towns will make up the Board of Directors of the Coop, will approve the articles of incorporation and will begin forming bylaws. Once the Coop is formed, the process of procuring financing will also begin, which is the first step in building the network.

Please come out and support this legislation!

Passing the MLP legislation is the first critical step to getting every business, student, institution and citizen connected to the 21st century digital world and ensuring we have access to the same advantages our urban and suburban counterparts enjoy.

If you have any questions, please contact your WiredWest town delegate(s): MaryEllen Kennedy and Kathy Soule-Regine. For more information about the MLP legislation and the work of WiredWest, please visit the WiredWest website by clicking WiredWest under the LINKS section on the Broadband Committee page.