



## BROADBAND AND NETWORK

# New Funds Aimed at Closing Internet Gaps in Springfield, Mass.

A grant from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute will allow the city of Springfield and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to study and develop a blueprint to ensure everyone has access to high-speed Internet.

November 06, 2023 • Jeanette DeForge, The Republican



(TNS) — After heading a City Council thinktank on digital equity for months, Michael Fenton said he realized what the city really needs is a formal plan to move forward to ensure children have Internet access to do schoolwork and adults are able to connect for their jobs.

Thanks to a \$102,000 grant from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, the city can now work with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to study and develop a blueprint to ensure everyone has access to high-speed Internet for work and entertainment.

"It is going to lay the groundwork to ensure that as a city we are taking the right steps to expand Internet access and affordability and really put Springfield residents in the driver's seat when it comes to the infrastructure of the future," City Council President Jesse Lederman said.

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At the start of the year, Lederman created four working groups, each of which

was headed by a councilor and made up of about a dozen volunteers, some of whom had been involved with the city in the past and others who had not. The groups were asked to submit reports of their results by the end of this year.

Fenton headed up the digital equity committee and said the team made a lot of progress but learned to receive more grant funding to increase access across the city it needed a formal plan. The group then learned about available state grants and applied to the Institute to seek out expertise to write one.

The state's Broadband Institute provides the money and assistance through different groups in the commonwealth and the digital equity committee selected the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to work with them since they already operate in Western Massachusetts, he said.

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"It means we will have the technical resources thru the PVPC to write the comprehensive plan...and it will enable us to get access to some of the federal resources," Fenton said.

The plan will include information about barriers that are currently in place for people who do not have a sufficient Internet connection and some solutions. The hope is it will pave the way for the city to be able to successfully apply for some of the \$147 million the state received through the national Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program, he said.

Unlike rural communities which are sometimes not wired with high-speed Internet, every home and business can easily be connected through Comcast.

The problem is many families simply cannot afford to pay the monthly fees to connect to the service, Lederman said.

"It is an issue of equity and social justice," he said.

There is also a federal program that allows low-income residents to connect at a lower rate, but information about it is now widely disseminated and does not reach the right people, Fenton said.

"This is really about social and workforce equity. In order to compete you need this and probably more importantly to succeed," Mayor Domenic J. Sarno said in announcing the Massachusetts Broadband Institute grant on Thursday. "We want to make it accessible to all our residents of Springfield."

Internet access is not the only problem, there are many barriers that laed to the digital divide, said Jean Canosa Albano, assistant director for public services at the libraries and a member of the digital equity committee.

"You cannot afford Internet access, you don't know how to click a mouse and everything in between," she said.

The Springfield City Libraries already hold a variety of classes to teach people computer basics and also circulate Chromebooks and hot spots to residents to help them.

"There are many layers that cause barriers to digital equity. You cannot afford Internet access, you don't know how to click a mouse and everything in between," she said.

The committee is holding a series of public meetings to find out more about the digital divide. Three will be in person on Nov. 13 at the East Forest Park Branch

Library on Surry Road; Nov. 29 at the East Springfield Neighborhood Council, 1437 Carew St. and Nov. 30 at the Mason Square Branch Library and a fourth will be Dec. 4 on Zoom. All meetings begin at 5:45 p.m., she said.

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