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## Grant will fund Springfield's development of digital equity plan

Nov. 7, 2023 | Chris Maza

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**Mayor Domenic Sarno announces a grant of more than \$100,000 for the development of a digital equity plan for the city. Behind him are, left to right, PVPC Executive Director Kimberly Robinson, Ward 3 City Councilor and Working Group for Digital Equity and Internet Access Mike Fenton, City Council President Jesse Lederman, Springfield**

**Public Library Assistant Director and Working Group for Digital Equity and Internet Access member Jean Canosa-Albano, and PVPC Director of Economic and Municipal Collaboration Eric Weiss.**

Reminder Publishing photo by Chris Maza

SPRINGFIELD — Officials announced on Nov. 2 the receipt of a grant they say will help the city's efforts to bridge the digital divide.

Mayor Domenic Sarno was joined at City Hall by City Council President Jesse Lederman and Ward 2 City Councilor Mike Fenton, who chairs the City Council's Working Group on Digital Equity and Internet Access, to celebrate a \$102,025 award from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute's Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program. The funding, they explained, would support the development of the city's digital equity plan in partnership with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

Initially joking that he still uses an Etch a Sketch, Sarno acknowledged, "Everything you do now needs technology, so we want to make it accessible to our residents in the city of Springfield."

The Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program, funded by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute through the state's American Rescue Plan Act allocation, is designed to guide municipalities toward investments that would increase access and usage of internet for populations most impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and prepare them to submit grant proposals for digital equity initiatives. To be eligible for the program, municipalities must include populations that are at or below 185% of the poverty line or 300% of the poverty line, as defined by the U.S. Treasury's ARPA guidelines.

The city announced in July it had applied for the program following a meeting between Sarno, and working group members Fenton, Archbishop Timothy Paul Baymon — CEO of Omnipoint, a Springfield-based affordable technology service and internet cafe — and Springfield Public Library Assistant Director Jean Canosa Albano.

"What this grant means to us is that we will have the technical resources through the PVPC to write the comprehensive plan. It is our expectation that it will be included in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' digital equity plan and will enable us to get access to some of the extensive federal resources through the BEAD program and other federal programs that have recently resulted in the commonwealth receiving upwards of \$147 million in funds that are going to be directed toward these types of projects," Fenton explained.

The BEAD — Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment — program, with \$42 billion in available federal funding, is designed to expand high-speed internet in the 50 states, Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories. President Joe Biden and federal officials announced the funding, including the \$147 million allocation to Massachusetts, on June 26.

Fenton said the digital equity plan would take a holistic approach to identifying root causes of the digital divide between urban centers such as Springfield and suburban communities as well as "pathways to solutions."

PVPC Executive Director Kimberly Robinson said the organization had been working with the city on neighborhood plans for over a year and "moving into the space of digital equity is absolutely the next step." She added preliminary conversations have already begun and initial feedback from residents reflects that accessibility and affordability are two primary barriers when addressing the digital gap.

"We all know that access to digital resources is vital to equal opportunity and inclusion in the 21st century," she said.

While affordability is considered a major contributor to inequitable access to services such as high-speed internet, Fenton noted that there are existing programs such as the Affordable Connectivity Program through the Universal Service Administrative Company overseen by the Federal Communications Commission.

Through this program, those whose household income is 200% or less than the Federal poverty guidelines, or those who participate in certain government assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicare, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children — also known as WIC — or federal public housing assistance can access high-speed internet for free or at a reduced rate. More information on this program can be found at [affordableconnectivity.gov](https://affordableconnectivity.gov) ([affordableconnectivity.gov](https://affordableconnectivity.gov)).

"One of the issues we found with that isn't that that program creates unaffordable internet access but that the program isn't adequately disseminated in reaching the right number of people in the city," he said.

Fenton has been leading the Working Group on Digital Equity and Internet Access since it was first established by Lederman in March and the council president credited Fenton and the group with doing the yeoman's work that made the grant a possibility.

"When I appointed [Fenton] as chair of this working group earlier this year, he asked me, 'Am I the right person for this role?' and I told him I knew that he was because he would go out there and find whatever resources that really were available," Lederman said, adding, "I think this also shows the great that comes from engaging residents and passionate experts in work of local government."

Canosa Albano noted the city's library system has been active in attempting to address equity issues, including teaching classes on accessing computers and the internet and related safety. Additionally, the library system allows the public to check out mobile hotspots and laptops with their library card.

Canosa Albano said her involvement in the Working Group on Digital Equity and Internet Access made her realize those efforts were "just the beginning," noting barriers for residents take many forms from something as simple as not knowing how to use a mouse to not being able to afford access or technical hardware.

Lederman's focus on the digital arena, including municipal fiber and internet access extends beyond the establishment of the working group. During the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, he led a coalition of local elected officials to pass City Council resolutions in Springfield, West Springfield and Holyoke in opposition to the Comcast/Xfinity data caps and in favor of exploring alternative internet options. In 2021, he also rallied that same coalition for a virtual forum on municipal internet with industry experts and advocated for a feasibility study for a municipal fiber-optic network for the city.



Earlier this year, he sent a letter to Gov. Maura Healey and the Massachusetts federal delegation asking for more funding resources to improve internet access. In that letter, he claimed that more than half of Springfield households lack access to broadband-speed internet.

"We have all come to realize that the internet is now an essential utility for individuals, for families and for businesses, and that's why earlier this year I appointed the Working Group on Digital Equity," Lederman said at the announcement. "This resulting partnership with the Massachusetts Broadband Institute and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission 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 drivers seat when it comes to the infrastructure of the future."

Lederman said while the digital equity plan will focus on improving immediate access, long term, he reiterate his belief that the city should be looking at alternatives to legacy cable and broadband services. As part of that process, a review of state and federal funding sources is essential, he stressed.

"Suburban communities are able to implement these types of networks at far less cost than urban environments such as ours, and you're seeing that conversation play out not just here but also in Worcester and Boston," he said. "It's really, in my view, an issue of equity and social justice. If suburban communities can advance this infrastructure at such an affordable rate, I think it's really incumbent upon the state and federal government to step in and provide resources to communities like Springfield to be able to do the same."

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