

Greene, Columbia awarded \$38M in broadband grants

By Roger Hannigan Gilson Columbia-Greene Media | Posted: Wednesday, March 1, 2017 12:30 am

New York announced the long-awaited phase II broadband grants late Tuesday.

The grants are the second of three phases in a program which seeks to bring high-speed internet to everyone in the state by the end of 2018 through joint public-private investments in telecommunications infrastructure.

More than \$38 million is going to five telecommunications companies serving the Twin Counties, and the funds will be applied to 16 municipalities in the region.

Fairpoint Communications, which serves the eastern and northern parts of Columbia County, will receive \$27,157,161 from the state. Frontier Communications, which covers parks of Clermont, Livingston and Gallatin, will receive \$2,637,923. Gtel Communications, which serves the southwestern corner of the county, will receive \$5,259,217.

Mid-Hudson Data Corp., which serves much of Greene County, as well as Hudson and surrounding areas, will receive \$849,818, and Margaretville Telephone Company in Delaware County will receive \$2.5 million through the program, according to the governor's office.

Optimism, Cautious Optimism

Greene County Economic Development, Tourism and Planning Director Warren Hart was enthused about the grants.

"This is great news; it's a high priority for the [Greene County] legislature," he said. "We work really hard with the local providers to bring broadband to unserved and underserved residents of Greene County.

"Unserved" residents have internet with download speeds of less than 25 megabytes per second, while "underserved" residents have between 25-100 Megabytes per second, according to the state's definition.

Hart said he was particularly happy about grants covering Lexington, Jewett and Halcott.

The towns had no hard-line internet or cable, and relied exclusively on cell-phone service, he said.

Mid-Hudson's grant was also good for Greene County, Hart said.

The first round of the grants allowed the company to make major inroads in solving the broadband problem by constructing a "multi-point mixed wireless system," which uses towers to transmit internet service to dishes on people's homes, Hart said.

Towns Benefiting From Broadband Build-out as Part of Round II – Capital Region

Columbia County			
Town	State Grants	Total Investment	Number of Units
Copake	\$4,241,198	\$5,301,237	1,353
New Lebanon	\$2,718,608	\$3,398,093	868
Chatham (Town)	\$2,564,621	\$3,205,590	891
Chatham (Village)	\$2,558,734	\$3,198,261	814
Livingston	\$2,338,091	\$2,922,424	1,278
Ghent	\$1,931,710	\$2,414,486	687
Ancram	\$1,784,499	\$2,230,510	579
Taghkanic	\$1,565,107	\$1,956,249	731
Gallatin	\$1,515,300	\$1,893,999	768
Hillsdale	\$1,447,444	\$1,809,205	490
Canaan	\$1,422,701	\$1,778,285	465

Greene County			
Town	State Grants	Total Investment	Number of Units
Lexington	\$1,384,192	\$1,729,914	401
Jewett	\$897,481	\$1,121,640	260
Halcott	\$225,833	\$322,554	80
Catskill (Village)	\$95,345	\$117,936	2,106
Cairo	\$69,901	\$86,464	1,544

SOURCE: Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office

Broadband grant shares

Source: Gov. Cuomo's office

Columbia County Board of Supervisors Chairman Matt Murell also greeted the announcement positively.

"I think it's great," he said. "We're thrilled that New York State listened to us about the need for expanded broadband."

Specifics about the companies' projects might not be known for some time, he added.

"The last time they made an announcement, it took us weeks to actually know what it meant," he said.

Calls to the state Broadband Program Office for specifics on how the money would be put into action were not immediately returned.

Murell thanked the Columbia County Economic Development Corporation, the county Broadband Committee, internet providers and grassroots groups such as Connect Columbia for bringing broadband issues to the state.

Dave Berman, a member of both Connect Columbia and the county Broadband subcommittee, expressed a more cautious form of optimism.

"Certainly the size of the grant to Fairpoint is quite impressive, but the devil's always in the details — let's see exactly where the money is going to go," he said.

"It's going to come down to how well they manage to use the funds to manage the expectations of the people," he said.

The promises Cuomo made were lofty, and the actual laying of utility lines was easier said than done, Berman said.

Many specifics of the agreements between the companies and the state will most likely not be public, he said.

"Everyone's waiting for more detail," he added.

Columbia County Economic Development Corporation Executive Director F. Michael Tucker said he was getting "a little pushback" from towns that did not get money.

These towns will be getting expanded broadband through a separate program, he said.

When Charter Communications and Time-Warner Cable merged in May 2016, they did so under an agreement with the state Public Service Commission that forced the new company, Charter Spectrum, to provide broadband internet to former Charter television customers.

Tucker praised the agreement.

"As a result of this investment and the service upgrades anticipated from the Time Warner-Charter merger, Columbia County will be in a strong position to promote business growth, attract new businesses and compete in a global economy," he said.

Assemblywoman Didi Barrett, D-106, released a statement describing the necessity of broadband.

"I am pleased to see the governor and the state understand the specific needs of Columbia County, as access to broadband is an issue I have been advocating for since I was first elected to office. Today's announcement is great news for our county and brings us one step closer to achieving the goal of broadband for all," Barrett said. "Access to broadband is more than an economic development tool — it is essential to functioning in the 21st century; this funding will, simply put, improve quality of life for the impacted communities."

'Broadband for All'

The Broadband for All program was launched March 2016 and aims to supply broadband to all New Yorkers by the end of 2018 through a series of state grants to private internet service providers.

Round one awards were announced by Cuomo at the Hudson Area Library on Aug. 3.

Almost \$9 million was given to State Telephone Company Inc. based in Coxsackie, \$2,512,562 was given to Germantown Telephone Company and \$1,009,339 to Mid-Hudson Data Corp., which serves Columbia, Greene and southern Albany counties.

The state will begin taking applications for round three of the program in the next 30 days, according to the governor's office, and the grants will be made up of \$170 million which was originally to be given to Verizon Wireless by the Federal Communications Commissions Connect America Fund to expand broadband coverage in the state.

Verizon rejected the money, and it was to be redistributed by the FCC in other states before New York petitioned the FCC to return it to the state.