

Lt. Gov. visits Franklin County to talk broadband, manufacturing awards

By SHELBY ASHLINE

Recorder Staff

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Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito heard all about Franklin County's recent broadband progress and roadblocks on Tuesday, visiting Charlemont, Colrain and Leyden for roundtable discussions.

Monroe and Turners Falls were also stops on her list, allowing her to tour Kingsley Hill Road, which received a \$1 million grant for roadway safety improvements, and announce the 2017 Advanced Manufacturing Training Program awards.

Members of the Leyden Broadband Committee told Polito about financial concerns involving paying surety bonds and affording to replace the town's unusually high number of deficient utility poles.

Broadband Committee Chairman Bob Ryan explained the Massachusetts Broadband Institute assumed a 4 percent pole replacement rate, or 33 poles. However, the study by MBI's selected vendor, Osmose Utilities Services, found 336 poles — or 36 percent — were categorized as needing replacement.

"You can't go from 33 to 336 without substantial cost impacts," Ryan said. "We potentially could have a \$700,000 hit coming at us. ... How are we supposed to respond when these big numbers come in?"

Selectboard Chairman Lance Fritz said given the project's current budget, where Leyden will pay a total of \$1,070,000 (not including loan interest) — allotting \$63,000 per year toward the project — taxes increase by 73 cents per \$1,000 valuation, or \$167.08 yearly for the average taxpayer. However, should the town need to account for the high number of deficient poles and allot \$91,000 per year, taxes would increase by \$1.06 per \$1,000 valuation, or \$258.63 yearly for the average taxpayer.

Ryan asked if the state might be able to provide additional help in covering surety bonds or pole replacement, to which Polito replied the extra costs are something she and her colleagues will need to examine further.

Still, Leyden representatives were optimistic, noting how the broadband network's engineering and design phase is scheduled to be complete by the end of October. Ryan said project manager Westfield Gas & Electric anticipates the network will be complete next August, offering 25 megabits per second speeds.

"At some point, that's what everyone will need," Ryan said. "We could live very comfortably with that."

"I think we all recognize the value and benefit of having broadband here," Polito said, commending the town for its progress.

Chairman of the Massachusetts Broadband Institute Peter Larkin said Leyden was "a front runner" in completing its pole survey. When Polito met with Colrain representatives earlier Tuesday afternoon for their broadband update, Town Coordinator Kevin Fox reported Westfield Gas & Electric's "Whip City Fiber" broadband division will soon begin mapping Colrain's utility poles.

\$1.3 million for training



Secretary of the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development Rosalin Acosta speaks before recipients of eight grants relating to advanced manufacturing training at Franklin County Technical School on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2017.

Later in the afternoon, Polito shifted gears to award more than \$1.3 million to eight workforce training organizations to provide classes to unemployed and underemployed individuals through the Advanced Manufacturing Training Program.

According to a state press release, the training grants will focus outreach to veterans, demographic groups that experience chronically higher rates of unemployment, and groups historically underrepresented in the manufacturing sector. The grants were awarded by the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development on behalf of the Governor's Workforce Skills Cabinet, building on \$9.5 million in Workforce Skills Capital grants awarded this year.

"Our administration's Workforce Skills Cabinet has been diligent in efforts to close the skills gap between residents and the workforce needs of Massachusetts' employers," Polito is quoted as saying in the release. "Today's announcement continues to build on our investments in technology, equipment and education for high-school students and adult learners from Boston to Pittsfield."

The awards were: \$207,900 to the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County; \$138,600 to the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board; \$84,150 to the Franklin Hampshire County Regional Employment Board; \$212,850 for the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, with Central and North Central Regional Employment Boards; \$272,250 for the Metro North Regional Employment Board; \$89,100 for the Center for Manufacturing Technology; \$103,950 for the Essex County Community Organization and \$227,700 for the Greater New Bedford Workforce Investment Board.

Recorder staff writer Diane Broncaccio contributed to this report.

Reach Shelby Ashline at: sashline@recorder.com

413-772-0261, ext. 257