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# Northwest Connecticut Struggles To Gain Broadband Access

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Still a struggle to get high-speed Internet in some parts of Northwest Connecticut

OCTOBER 4, 2015, 3:38 PM

**H**ARTFORD — Connecticut's Litchfield hills, which boast premier antique shops, vineyards and 18th century inns, also feature cellphone dead zones and super-slow Internet service that infuriate residents and frustrate businesses.

Telecommunications companies say hilly terrain and dense woods are to blame and angry residents accuse the companies of refusing to wire the region because the investment doesn't pay in sparsely populated areas.

"We're not going under, but it's increasingly painful," said Klaus Knuth, innkeeper at the Blackberry River Inn in Norfolk.

Guests expect to connect to the Internet on their phones, tablets or laptops, but Wi-Fi is only "so-so" in the building that houses most of the inn's rooms, he said. "The rest is dead," Knuth said.

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Some businesses such as Founders Insurance Agency in Salisbury and Torrington rely on coaxial cable that transmits data, but not graphics or video. Frank Buonocore, a company vice president, called the service reliable and "adequate for our purposes."

Others, such as Steve Bowen, a retired advertising executive, make private arrangements to secure broadband. He said he paid \$5,000 to bring a line to his Sharon home and now advises residents and officials how to market their campaign for expanded broadband access.

"We can wait 10 years for it to come here naturally or we can jump the gun," Bowen said.

Known for its natural beauty on the doorstep of the Berkshires in Massachusetts and New York's

Hudson Valley, the Litchfield hills are home to celebrities such as Meryl Streep and Henry Kissinger and are a destination for tourists and New Yorkers who can afford second homes.

But local officials and residents say limited cellphone and high-speed Internet access stall business growth and undermine schools that depend on the web.

"It's difficult to attract people to that kind of a landscape," said state Consumer Counsel Elin Swanson Katz.

Connecticut officials promoting an initiative for super-fast Internet cannot force unregulated telecommunications firms to expand broadband. "We're sort of a catalyst," said Bill Vallee, the state's broadband policy coordinator.

State Rep. Roberta Willis, D-Salisbury, accuses telecommunications companies of failing to do enough to build broadband networks.

"You just can't say it's the topography and walk away," she said. "If electricity companies were deregulated like this there would be no electricity in my district."

Comcast spokeswoman Laura Brubaker Crisco said the telecommunications firm has extended its network nearly 62 miles in northwest Connecticut since 2005 and completed nearly 100 projects extending fiber more than 10 miles in the past two years.

"However, there are some low-density areas where it is not economic for Comcast or other providers to build out," she said.

David Snyder, vice president for engineering for the east region of Frontier Communications Corp., said due to the area's topography, "it's just natural the investment and the time become more challenging."

Frontier has connected broadband to 40,000 households in Connecticut, including the northwest region, since it began operations in the state a year ago, he said.

How many residents in the region are without broadband is not known. Katz and Kim Maxwell, the technical adviser to the group of officials and others working to extend broadband, said about 10 percent of homes in rural areas are estimated to have no access. Vallee said it could be more.

Closing the so-called digital divide separating those with and without high-speed Internet access has drawn funding from the Federal Communications Commission and the telecommunications industry. Alex Phillips, president of the Wireless Internet Service Providers Association, which

serves rural areas, said too much money is spent on studies, "but the regular guy still doesn't have adequate choice or adequate service."

Northwest Connecticut includes about 22 towns with about 200,000 residents in 85,000 households, Maxwell said. Extending broadband in much of the area could be completed by 2018 at a cost of as much as \$350 million financed by bonds, he said.

"People want this to happen," he said. "I'd be really surprised if this doesn't happen."

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