

# Internet access affecting home sales

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Both Kevin Hart and Jonathan Barkan knew what they were looking for when they bought their homes, in Montague and Conway, respectively: peace, quiet and the serenity of country settings, with access to broadband.

But while they're in towns categorized as "under-served" for high-speed Internet, they're in essentially dead zones, as far as having access to cable or a Digital Subscriber Line.

"It's brutal," said Hart, who lives on Richardson Road in Montague, less than 100 yards from the Leverett line, without even the prospect of easily getting access to the townwide fiber-optic that the neighboring town to the south is in the process of installing.

County real estate agents agree that it's increasingly difficult to sell houses without access to broadband provided by cable companies or Digital Subscriber Line service from Verizon.

"It's very important," said Don Mailloux, a real estate agent with Coldwell Banker Realtors in South Deerfield. "People won't even look at certain areas in Leverett and Shutesbury or some of the hilltowns."

Hart starts his day commuting to his office in West Springfield, 45 to 50 minutes away, simply to access work files before he can head out to see customers in southern Vermont and New Hampshire, or elsewhere in Massachusetts or Connecticut.

That's because the satellite system set up by Hart, who paid \$320,000 for his property, takes up to an hour to download the work files that take him a minute or two to look at in the office. "Satellite is glorified dial-up," he said.

When he moved from Holyoke seven years ago and asked about getting the Internet, "I was told by the previous owner, 'It's coming. It's just a matter of time. It's just around the corner.' I believed him because I liked the serenity of the property. I was blinded until I got there starting to really look. What I was told I was going to get is not realistically going to happen. Seven years later, it's still 'just around the corner.'"

In fact, the state has recently completed building its 1,200-mile "middle-mile" network throughout western Massachusetts, and is exploring ways of getting service providers to link to it for a fiber-to-the-home in 45 "unserved" towns using a proposed \$40 million bond, as well as offering cable companies incentives for building out their network.

But even though towns like Conway, Shelburne or Montague show up on lists of towns that are technically served by cable and DSL, anyone living in those areas without access to those broadband options feels they're on a different planet.

"Hart, who's been named to the newly created Montague Broadband Committee to examine how the 115 homes in town with no broadband access can be brought into the 21st century, said his real concern is for when his children, now 2 and 3, begin school.

"If they have to do homework online, they'll be at severe disadvantage" he says. "Most likely I'd have to relocate. But nobody would buy my house."

## Conway

Barkan spent three years looking at properties before settling on a half-million dollar home in Conway. A video producer from the Boston area, he insisted on availability of broadband.

"We pretty much found the perfect house with fabulous land, with one deficiency," said Barkan, who got conflicting information from Comcast, about whether that part of town in the extreme southwest corner of Conway near the Williamsburg line was served. When he finally learned that service ended 14 poles away, he agreed to buy the house anyway and get satellite service.

"It works and it's pretty reliable, but it's as slow as can be," said Barkan, who routinely has to do video research, review and share works in progress with other producers and upload his work to put it online. "Even to view my own work is sketchy, and it's very frustrating, day to day. There are so many things I need to share or see. It's pathetically slow. I don't see how I can work from here."

Instead, Barkan rents an office in Arlington as well as an apartment nearby so that he can use the business-grade cable that's a given in the Boston metro area.

"I want to do more and more in Conway," he said. "The setting is so spectacular. It's such a negative to the economic climate, since in the Pioneer Valley and in Berkshire County, there are a lot of professional animators and multimedia folks who do Hollywood-level production work."

Conway-based real estate agent Joanie Schwartz said that of her 20 listings, most are in the hilltowns, and several properties have dial-up.

"I don't even get calls on those," she said. "Or I get calls, and they ask about Internet, and when I say there is none, they say, 'Nice to meet you. See you later.' It's become a huge issue, and it's not going away."

Mark Abramson of Cohn and Co. recalled a couple that were looking at buying a property where they could raise horses, "but they refused to get out of their car to look at the property because it didn't have high-speed Internet. It had satellite, and they didn't want to deal with satellite. It's spotty, and when you have bad weather, satellite, it doesn't work."

Abramson guessed that not having access to cable or DSL might mean getting \$10,000 or \$20,000 less for the property, but he added, "You could say, 'I'm going to take \$10,000 or \$20,000 off the price, and that could be a motivating factor for some people, if they aren't dependent on it and they're just going to put up with it. But many people won't even look at it.'"

Corinne Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Real Estate agreed.

"It's not even (about) the amount people are asking; they just won't buy it, period. Because no amount of money will fix it," said Fitzgerald. "I had a house listed in Shelburne, in Peckville, that I could have sold five times, except that they didn't have high speed."

Fitzgerald, the immediate past president of the Realtors Association of the Pioneer Valley, called the lack of high-speed availability in many of the region's outlying areas unfortunate, "especially when we live in an area where people can telecommute. They have the ability to have quality of life here in this beautiful environment. But sometimes when you go out to these places it's not available, so that can't work. That cuts back on a portion of our market."

This story was corrected from the original print edition to correctly identify Don Mailloux as a real estate agent with Coldwell Banker Realtors in South Deerfield.