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Council to set rules for distributing broadband grant

By [Eric Eyre](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Three years after securing a \$5 million legislative appropriation, the West Virginia Broadband Deployment Council has taken the first steps toward setting up a system to distribute the bulk of the grant funds.

The council established a committee Friday that will create an application process for tapping the state money set aside for projects that bring high-speed Internet service to "unserved" and "underserved" areas in West Virginia.

Telecommunications companies, nonprofit groups and public agencies are expected to apply for the funds.

"[The committee's] mission is to develop a grant application others can respond to," said Commerce Secretary Keith Burdette, who heads the council.

Burdette said the committee also could decide whether to set a maximum dollar limit on individual grants.

The Legislature established the Broadband Council in 2008. The council has distributed about \$400,000 of the \$5 million account so far. Much of the money has paid a consultant who is helping the state develop an online map of broadband availability across the state.

"There's been very little activity in that account," Burdette said during Friday's council meeting.

The state's broadband map and website is expected become available in mid-April. Council members plan to review the mapping project at their next meeting.

Former Cabell Circuit Judge Dan O'Hanlon, who now works for the state Higher Education Policy Commission, will lead the broadband application committee.

The council hasn't said when it plans to start distributing the grant funds. Burdette said the entire council -- not the committee -- would decide whether to fund proposed broadband projects.

James Patterson of the Central Appalachia Regional Network said the council should wait until the governor appoints a new member who represents the community before making any major decisions.

Last month, broadband council member Mike Friloux abruptly resigned after The Charleston Gazette reported that he had held a seat on the board illegally since 2008. Friloux, a Citynet executive, was serving as a "general public" member, a position that requires West Virginia residency. He lives in Tulsa, Okla.

Friloux also was supposed to represent consumers, but he said he thought he was representing Citynet and other telecommunications providers.

Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, acting as governor, has yet to appoint a replacement.

"At the end of the day, it's consumers who have to live with the consequences of these [Broadband Council] decisions," said Patterson, whose group advocates for rural communities.

Patterson added that the council's grant funds also should be used for public outreach and education programs designed to increase the demand for high-speed Internet in West Virginia. The

state ranks 49th in the nation for broadband demand, according to a recent survey.

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