

Survey of IT needs seen critical to area's economy



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DARYL CARLSON/CITIZEN PHOTO HENRY LIPMAN, right, a member of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy group, discusses information technology needs for the area during an editorial board interview with *The Citizen* on Wednesday. Looking on is "Red" Hutchinson, another group member.

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Say what you will about the state of telecommunications services in the Lakes Region and Central New Hampshire, but the bottom line, says a group that has been studying the situation, is that it's actually pretty good.

The trouble, however, is the matter of getting services to areas outside of population centers in a way that makes it economically attractive to providers.

Toward meeting that end — and toward the larger goal of retaining existing jobs and attracting new ones to the region — the New Economy subcommittee of the Lakes Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Committee is asking all residents in its 30-community service area what they want or need computer communications-wise.

The subcommittee seeks a handle on what is needed and to then work with providers to get it to potential users, be they in Hill or Holderness, Barnstead or Bridgewater.

Additionally, the subcommittee is hoping to recruit a team of "high-end" information technology users to form a steering committee that will monitor where telecommunications is and where it should be going locally.

Inquiries can be addressed to either the Lakes Region Planning Commission, www.lakesrpc.org, or the Belknap County Economic Development Council, www.bcedc.org.

Since 2006, the Planning Commission and various agencies have been putting together the first-ever Lakes Region CEDS plan along with the assistance of six subcommittees.

The CEDS Committee's vision statement recognizes the "critical importance of maintaining and nurturing our natural environment and diverse cultural heritage" and strives to "improve the quality of life of its cities and towns through the increased capacity and prosperity of its businesses, civic, social and education institutions and its citizens."

Another practical benefit of completing the CEDS process, which is something that could be done by summer 2009, is the ability to qualify for federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) assistance.

The New Economy subcommittee's efforts fit into the larger CEDS and are based upon the "IT infrastructure" on which both current and future economic development depends, said Henry Lipman, the subcommittee chair and the chief financial officer at LRGHealthcare.

Looking around at what is available in terms of information technologies in the Lakes Region, the subcommittee, said Jennifer Boulanger, was "pleasantly surprised" to find that providers already sell services that many businesses and residents want and that are the equivalent of the robust capabilities usually found in a much larger metropolitan area.

But in many places in the Lakes Region there are too few "subscribers per mile" to justify a provider spending the money necessary to install or expand an IT system. That is why the subcommittee, said Lipman, was looking to identify users, what they want or need and how to aggregate them in a package that can be used to entice providers.

Lipman expects it will take about six months to complete the survey and another six months analyze the survey findings.

"We're at the beginning," said Lipman, adding, "We have to help ourselves" because right now neither end users nor providers fully understand what is available and what more needs to be done on the telecommunications front locally.

"It's here," said S.W. "Red" Hutchinson — who is LRGHealthcare's director of information services — of a solid telecommunications infrastructure "backbone" in the Lakes Region, but "it's just going to take a lot longer to get it" to the more remote sections of the region.

Home-based businesses are one of the fastest-growing sectors of the New Hampshire economy and they will need to be on the cutting-edge of telecommunications advances, said Hutchinson, while Boulanger added that the need is universal and extends even to grandparents who just want to swap large electronic files with their families across the country.

