

Municipal Light Plant FAQ

This document contains frequently asked questions regarding the Massachusetts Municipal Light Plant (MLP) legislation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are Fiber and Broadband Services?

Broadband is a word commonly used to describe services that are provided over high-speed data and communication networks. Modern high-speed broadband networks are built using fiber optic cable to deliver large amounts of bandwidth and speed. Broadband services most often include Internet (data), voice (telephone, radio) and video (television, on-demand, streaming). In Wilbraham, broadband services are primarily provided to properties by incumbent providers (carriers) over slower copper (dsl, cable), wireless and satellite technology.

What is a Municipal Light Plant (MLP)?

Municipal Light Plant legislation is in Chapter 164 of Massachusetts General Laws and was initially created many years ago to enable municipalities to form their own electric departments. In the 1950s, community television was added to the legislation, and in the 1990s, the legislation was amended so towns could engage in the provision of telecommunications (broadband) services.

What Does Becoming an MLP Do For a Municipality?

The benefits of a municipality becoming an MLP are legal and financial. An MLP gives the municipality the legal right to enter into agreements with the pole owners so that the MLP can apply for licenses to attach as a commercial third party on the existing poles or in carrier owned conduit. It also helps a municipality that wants to bond so that they can build and own their own broadband (fiber) network. An MLP can provide services not only to municipal government and school buildings, **but also to businesses and residences.**

How Does a Municipality Become an MLP?

The municipality would need to have positive votes at 2 public meetings within a 13 month period, no less than 2 months apart. The most direct way to do this would be to have the MLP vote take place at two consecutive annual town meetings. This could also be handled at an annual town meeting and a subsequent special town meeting at least 2 months later.

What are the Costs Associated with Becoming an MLP?

There are none. Becoming an MLP is more of an administrative or "housekeeping" function and enables the municipality to have a choice whether or not to provide fiber and broadband services beyond municipal government and school buildings.

After a Successful MLP Vote, What Happens Next?

After the municipality has voted to create the MLP, it would initially be overseen by the Board of Selectmen. At any point after that, the Board of Selectmen can choose to create a commission to oversee the MLP. Beyond that, the MLP would be able to expand to operate in a similar fashion as existing municipal enterprise funds (such as water/sewer, etc).

How Does the MLP Relate to the Mass Broadband (MBI) Fiber Project?

The Mass Broadband Institute (MBI) system brings an "open access middle-mile network" over fiber into many of Wilbraham's municipal government and school buildings. The open access nature of the MBI network enables these buildings to have a choice of Internet and broadband service providers beyond the incumbent cable and telephone companies (carriers) in town. However, without becoming an MLP, only the municipal government and school buildings can be serviced through the MBI fiber system. With an MLP, Wilbraham would gain the ability to offer fiber and broadband services to businesses and residents, including cross-connecting into the MBI fiber network.