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January 7, 2021

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The first round of a national Federal Communications Commission program designed to improve broadband internet for rural residents will bring over \$368 million to Pennsylvania for an estimated 327,000 people.

The monies are part of Phase I of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, a Federal Communications Commission program designed to improve rural internet access. Of the \$368 million allocated, three companies operating in Susquehanna County will see a total of \$18.8 million to improve services to over 5,000 households. The \$18.8 million will be divided as follows: Frontier Communications Corporation, receiving \$5,146,251 for 1,982 households; Co-op Connections Consortium, \$13,593,349 for 3,655 households; and Space Exploration Technologies Corp., \$84,771 for 65 households.

According to the BroadbandNow website, which helps consumers find and compare Internet service providers, the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund is a Federal Communications Commission program designed to close the digital divide in the United States by investing billions of dollars in the construction of rural broadband networks. The program is expected to expand rural broadband access to 10 million Americans.

The \$20.4 billion program will distribute funds nationally for a 10-year period to winning providers after the auction process is complete. The program is split into two phases, the first which will initially distribute \$16 billion and the second which will distribute \$4.4 billion as well as any other remaining funds.

According to the Public Utility Commission only a handful of states received more broadband support than Pennsylvania. Overall the federal program is intended to expand broadband service to over 10 million rural Americans. "Access to broadband, especially for those who tele-work, senior

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citizens, fire and emergency workers and students who are taking classes remotely has become even more crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic," Sen. Gene Yaw (R-23) said. "This funding will benefit thousands of my constituents who currently lack internet service," Yaw said in a prepared statement released earlier this month.

Susquehanna County Commissioner Judy Herschel, a member of the Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Affairs, welcomed the receipt of the funds in an emailed statement but encouraged additional continued action on the state level. "The importance of investing in technological infrastructure in rural areas across our country has never been more evident than now," Herschel said. "In Susquehanna County, the lack of necessary high-speed internet throughout all corners of our county has had a direct negative effect on our education, healthcare, and economic systems.

The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Auction is a step in the right direction, however continued future Federal and State funding, along with a State Broadband Plan, is necessary for us to get the job done." "I would like to see all elected officials, particularly our State and Federal Legislators, continue to be vocal, prioritize and advocate for this on behalf of Susquehanna County residents on this issue. Our children, business owners and community members deserve it," Herschel said.

In an emailed release issued late last week, Rep. Tina Pickett (R-110), echoed the remarks of both Yaw and Herschel. "The slow pace of broadband expansion in our region has been a major frustration of mine for many years," Pickett said. "With more people working and learning from home these days, reliable internet access is needed now more than ever. The General Assembly recently enacted several new laws relating to broadband expansion. Those measures, along with this federal funding, should lead to improved broadband access locally and across the Commonwealth, sooner rather than later."

Last month the Center for Rural Pennsylvania released a report indicating that a survey of 1,446 rural and urban households indicated that over 18 per cent of rural households used either dial up or DSL service as compared to just over 6 percent of urban households. By contrast, 54 percent of urban households enjoyed cable internet access compared to only 34 percent of rural homes.
– ***Susquehanna Independent (Montrose, Susquehanna Co.)***

The storming of the U.S. Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump played out on television in searing fashion Wednesday, with stunning pictures of guns drawn in the House of Representatives and hand-to-hand combat with police. The scenes of bedlam and fear at the center of national government erupted quickly, but journalists wondered whether they should have been a surprise. "It's hard to believe that this is going on," said CNN's Wolf Blitzer. "This is unprecedented, it is dangerous and this is so, so embarrassing for the United States of America."

The social media giants Twitter and Facebook took the unprecedented step of suspending Trump's privileges to post messages on their platforms, at least temporarily. Both companies said Trump had violated their policies. Journalists had gathered to follow Congress' counting of electoral college ballots to seal the victory of President-elect Joe Biden, a normally routine event turned tense by the challenge to the vote by some of Trump's political allies.

As that debate was ongoing, the media's focus shifted to outside Congress, where supporters who had gathered to hear an aggrieved president fume about his defeat began streaming to the Capitol. They climbed the Capitol steps, where one person held a placard saying "fight for Trump." After breaching the building, pictures emerged of an armed standoff in the House as politicians cowered behind desks and people smashed the building's windows and climbed in. Newsmax showed stunning footage of police and rioters squaring off in the Capitol Rotunda. "The mob has overtaken the process of

trying to certify the Electoral College,” said Fox News Channel reporter Chad Pergram. “Security here at the U.S. Capitol has failed.”

Given Trump’s speech and two months of baseless charges that the election was rigged, several journalists raised questions about why law enforcement seemed so unprepared. “The shock I have is how easy this was,” said NBC’s Chuck Todd. As images of people banging on a door at the Capitol aired, ABC News anchor George Stephanopoulos said, “that is not Ukraine, that is not Belarus.”

There were debates in newsrooms across the country about what terminology to use to describe the participants. Demonstrators? Protestors? Rioters? A mob? CNN’s Jake Tapper said, “we call them terrorists.” NBC’s Lester Holt said “there are some elements of a coup attempt.” CBS News’ Norah O’Donnell conducted an extraordinary interview with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, pressing him on whether he has urged Trump to do something to stop his supporters and confronting him on whether the false claims of widespread electoral fraud had led to it. “I just wonder whether someone is going to ... call a spade a spade and I am giving you the opportunity right now,” O’Donnell said.

Biden spoke to the nation, followed by Trump. The president urged his supporters to respect law enforcement and go home, but also said he “loved” them and repeated claims of a stolen election. Tapper wondered whether CNN should even have aired it. On CNBC, Shepard Smith ordered a tape of Trump’s message stopped in midstream. “Stop the tape,” he said. “That is not true, and we are not airing it.” CNN’s Abby Phillip said Americans needed to question whether Trump was even capable of leading the country for the next two weeks. “He is inciting violence against the government itself, lawlessness, vandalism and he’s also completely MIA in terms of his principal job, which is to keep this country safe,” she said.

Even as the building was being stormed, Trump supporters in the media were calling into question who was responsible. On One America News Network, anchor Dan Ball said the violence was nothing like civil rights demonstrations last summer, and suggested without evidence that Antifa demonstrators may have disguised themselves as Trump supporters for the siege on the Capitol. “We don’t have all the facts,” he said.

Fox anchor Martha MacCallum, during the demonstration, called the breach of the Capitol a “huge victory” for protestors. She said they have “disrupted the system in an enormous way” and said it was an escalation of protests that included a demonstration in front of Missouri Republican Sen. Josh Hawley’s home.

There were tense moments for reporters outside the Capitol. A Fox News reporter asked a man to stop blocking his camera. A crew from The Associated Press had its equipment stolen and destroyed. The nation’s deep divisions played out in the media before and after protestors moved on the Capitol. Fox News Channel, Newsmax and OANN all carried the president’s speech Wednesday live. CNN and MSNBC, meanwhile, ignored the president’s words.

When Congress resumed debating Wednesday evening, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and MSNBC played all or a portion of Utah Sen. Mitt Romney’s speech condemning objections to the vote certification. Fox did not show Romney. The nation’s largest broadcasters, ABC, CBS and NBC, devoted virtually all of their prime times to the Washington drama. – **Associated Press**

I beg your forgiveness, but this is something I do at the start of new two-year legislative sessions. It’s akin to home maintenance. Like cleaning out heat ducts, having the chimney swept or getting a termite inspection. Not pleasant. Repetitious. Unlikely to make a visible difference. But good for the long-term value of what you own.

And while it doesn't feel like it, you own the legislature. It's yours. Everything it does is with your money. That includes just being there, to the tune of \$700 million-plus every two years. And perhaps you've noticed your "full time" legislature is back from a holiday break (which started in November).

Yep, rested, ready and rarin' to go. Or, as [Republican House Majority Leader Kerry Benninghoff](#) put it, "Time to get Pennsylvania rockin' and rollin'." Well, eventually. The new session starts with its usual grueling schedule. Between now and mid-March? Nine voting days in the House, six in the Senate. Speaking of the Senate, it began with a bang, eh? [Made national news on its swearing-in day](#) by dissolving into shouting partisan chaos. GOP leaders wouldn't seat decade-long Allegheny County incumbent Democrat Jim Brewster, whose narrow reelection was certified by the state. Then they tossed presiding officer Democratic Lt. Gov. John Fetterman from the podium. Want a banana with your republic?

Thankfully, lawmakers' exhausting schedule and political theater comes when there's not much need for actual public service. I mean other than for all the businesses and industries, families and individuals ravaged by coronavirus. Or revisiting needed stuff ignored last year, like targeted aid for restaurants, extending eviction protections or approving paid sick leave during a pandemic.

But help for hundreds of thousands of citizens could have to wait while our elected "leaders" attend to politics: re-legislating mail-in voting to perpetuate the notion Joe Biden didn't win the state; applying their gerrymandering skills to judicial elections; and setting about re-gerrymandering their own and congressional district lines. Hey, "the people's business" is a busy one.

Anyway, welcome to a new circus season of the deliberative body I like to say is the reason Pennsylvania's slogan should be "Land of Low Expectations." Ah, but what if these leaders resolved to improve their service, or even just their image? That image, by the way, isn't the best.

In 12 of the last 15 [Franklin & Marshall College polls](#), Pennsylvania voters said the state's "most important problem" (except for COVID-19 in last year's polling) is "government, politicians." Who better fits that definition than members of our legislature? I often get reader suggestions for the legislature. These range from making lawmakers' salaries no more than the state's median household income (about \$63,000) to reducing the number of lawmakers. Legislative base pay is \$88,610. But dozens in "leadership" get from \$101,000 to \$138,000. And, with 253 lawmakers, we have the largest "full-time" legislature in America, despite being the fifth most populous state.

But such changes have no shot. Our legislature loves its pay, perks, pensions and overall size. A large, amorphous body is a great place to hide from accountability. Think of Congress. Yet the pandemic underscores the importance and fragility of trust in government. The legislature could and should resolve to help restore such trust. Start small. Everybody wear masks. Even if you don't believe in it, many of your constituents do, as does science. Be a model for something other than bickering.

Abstain from annual automatic pay raises at least until the state's economy and unemployment numbers return to pre-pandemic status. (The latest automatic raise was declined, so there's precedent here.) Stop locking popular measures in committees. Allow floor votes on needed reforms such as merit selection of state judges and a citizens' redistricting commission.

Resolve to allow the public a yes/no vote on term limits. Join the majority of states and raise the minimum wage. Then cut the corporate net income tax, one of the nation's highest. Do *something* to show the public you can be more than its most important problem. Or go on as you are: putting politics over people, and fighting over who gets the big boy chair. — **John Baer's column in Harrisburg Patriot-News**



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