



February 3, 2021

Deadline Hollywood
Comcast Launches
Black Experience
Channel On Xfinity,
Endorsed by African
American Film
Critics Association

Charter Communications, the provider of Spectrum-branded internet, cable and phone services, announced Monday a multibillion-dollar plan to expand broadband internet access to more than 1 million unserved homes and businesses across 24 states, a project that responds to the escalating demand for online connections during the coronavirus pandemic.

Fierce Wireless
AT&T to pilot 5G for
healthcare with U.S.
Veterans Affairs

Stamford-based Charter intends to invest approximately \$5 billion in the initiative, with plans to hire more than 2,000 employees and contractors to support the broadband expansion. The total includes \$1.2 billion that Charter won in an auction of the Federal Communications Commission's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund program, which will direct about \$20 billion during the next 10 years to finance broadband networks in unserved rural areas. "As Americans across the country increasingly rely on broadband to work, learn, access health care and stay in touch with family and loved ones, bringing broadband access to more unserved areas should be a priority for all stakeholders," Charter CEO and Chairman Tom Rutledge said in a statement. "Charter's new multibillion-dollar buildout initiative further highlights the importance of the sophisticated broadband networks that the U.S. cable industry has built over several decades and the industry's commitment to the local communities it serves."

Philadelphia Inquirer
Comcast will
postpone new data
fees for Northeast
internet customers,
AG Shapiro says

Politico
Bezos to step down
as Amazon's CEO —
but isn't leaving
Washington behind

Charter said that in rural areas it would build out a network that would offer to all new customers 1-gigabit-per-second broadband access, with starting speeds of 200 megabits per second. Charter will expand in the following states: Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin. Connecticut is not among the states supported by the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund allotment to Charter. The company serves 36 towns in its home state, mostly in western and northeastern parts of Connecticut.

Fierce Video
Binge-viewing
becomes normalized
for older consumers

KDKA-TV,
Pittsburgh
U.S. Rep Guy
Reschenthaler Says
Vote To Disqualify
Pa's Election

The initiative complements Charter's existing buildout plans, which include company-funded expansions and a number of state broadband grant projects. In total, Charter serves more than 31 million customers across 41 states. Its infrastructure spans more than 750,000 miles, with the new construction covering about 200,000 miles.

**Results Was
'Symbolic' And
Holds Open Option
To Run For Senate**

**Philadelphia Inquirer
Montgomery County
Republican Jeff
Bartos is taking
steps to run for U.S.
Senate in
Pennsylvania**

The surging demand for home internet access during the coronavirus crisis has [sparked major growth](#) for Charter, which added 1.9 million customers in 2020. "Historically, the incremental cost of extending wires to very rural residences exceeded the net revenue available. But the pandemic has raised the importance of residential broadband from 'high' to 'essential,' and made customers value it over other alternatives," said David Souder, associate professor and academic director of executive programs in the University of Connecticut's business school. "As a manual task, however, it will take some time to implement — it's not as easy as flipping a switch."

Charter officials similarly acknowledged a number of factors such as pole applications, pole replacement rules and related "issue resolution processes" that could affect the speed of the rural buildout. In parts with sparser populations, broadband providers' need to access multiple utility poles for every new home served, as opposed to the multiple homes connected to each pole in denser areas. "The more cooperation we have with the pole owners and utility companies, the faster we can connect these communities with high-speed internet services," Rutledge said. "We look forward to working with local municipalities, electric cooperatives and investor-owned utilities to ensure that permits are obtained in a timely, fair and cost-effective fashion."

Charter said that in the past three years it has invested more than \$20 billion in infrastructure and technology, with the goal of providing new services and accommodating more customer traffic. At the same time, it said that it has extended its network to reach nearly 2.5 million new homes and businesses, about one-third of which are in rural areas. Ranking last year as the No. 70 company on the Fortune 500 list, Charter is headquartered at 400 Atlantic St., in downtown Stamford. At the end of 2020, it employed a total of more than 96,000, including about 1,300 based in Stamford. Later this year, Charter plans to start [moving into a new headquarters](#) a few blocks away, at 406 Washington Blvd., next to the downtown Metro-North Railroad station. — **Stamford (CT)**

Advocate

In 2020, the coronavirus thrust state government into the lives of Pennsylvanians unlike any other time in recent history. But the nation's largest full-time legislature — with some of the highest-paid lawmakers — emerged from the year having failed to address some of the public's most pressing needs, and marred by some in the majority party who sought to undercut the election results, spread misinformation, and fuel hyper-partisan fights.

Only 27 of the 140 bills passed by the legislature and signed by Wolf in 2020 directly addressed problems brought on by the pandemic, according to a Spotlight PA review of the General Assembly's record. That includes several major budget-related measures, including one that dispersed federal coronavirus relief dollars, but the tally doesn't include more than a dozen technical appropriations bills. Instead, the GOP-controlled chambers spent large portions of the spring, summer, and fall challenging Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf's expanded powers, which they believed were running dangerously unchecked.

Left on the table were relief measures that had wide bipartisan support. Renters and home owners in the state, for instance, [missed out on \\$108 million](#) in aid because Republican leadership in the Senate [failed to advance](#) fixes to a broken state program. That money was rerouted to pad the Department of Corrections budget. And despite a litany of pleas from counties for more flexibility in administering the state's new mail voting law, critical changes stalled amidst partisan bickering. That includes one that advocates said would have helped election officials avoid prolonged vote counting that fueled former President Donald Trump's baseless fraud conspiracies.

Overall, Democrats were the prime sponsor on only 14 bills enacted last year — while Republicans were able to enact 126 of their proposals. That's in large part due to [rules approved at the start of every legislative session](#) that give

GOP leadership near-total control over what legislation gets heard, even if bills have wide bipartisan support. At the same time, Wolf used his veto power to nix a record 19 bills — 15 more than he did in 2019. Of the bills Wolf vetoed in 2020, all but two were sponsored by Republicans.

The majority of those vetoes — 13 — were coronavirus-related, and primarily aimed at opening sectors of the economy ahead of the Wolf administration's schedule. "No question, we spent way too much time fighting with the governor about his authority, and it ended up being at the expense of other, more important issues," Senate Minority Leader Jay Costa (D., Allegheny) said of the legislature's approach to law-making in 2020. "We left way too much unfinished business on the table."

Republican legislative leaders did not respond to several requests for comment for this story. Over the last year, however, they have complained repeatedly that Wolf had turned aloof and autocratic in his decision-making, sidestepping a branch of government that is supposed to provide checks to his executive authority. They have also been sharply critical of the governor's handling of nearly every aspect of the pandemic, from business closures and the crush of unemployment compensation requests to the vaccine rollout.

Longtime GOP political strategist Christopher Nicholas said the legislature's actions weren't about power or partisanship, but about rightly moving to claw back "the creeping growth of the power of the executive." "You had the governor out there making all these decisions by himself," Nicholas said. "If you are the legislature, you are like, 'Wait a second, we have to be involved in this somehow.'" In the weeks after the first cases of the coronavirus were detected in Pennsylvania, the legislature approved measures, some at Wolf's behest, that eased eligibility requirements for unemployment compensation, delayed tax deadlines, and waived testing requirements for schools. All were meant to provide relief at a time when public health officials were still trying to understand the virus and how to contain it.

Lawmakers also approved measures that extended benefit-related protections to police officers, firefighters, and others who had contracted COVID-19, as well as provided grants to emergency medical responders and required they be notified of coronavirus cases in their communities. Other bills extended the time period for obtaining federal clearances for certain professions, and permitted bars and restaurants hit hard by the pandemic to sell cocktails to-go.

But Republicans soon zeroed in on the governor's broad powers during an emergency and became set on reversing a number of Wolf's restrictions on business and residents. Although shutdowns were recommended by public health experts, Wolf's business waiver program, in particular, [came under fierce criticism for being secretive and unfair](#). One bill, passed by the legislature and later vetoed by Wolf, would have given counties the authority to decide coronavirus mitigation plans for local businesses, among other things. Another resolution struck down by Wolf in July would have [eliminated his disaster declaration](#) for COVID-19 altogether.

Other measures that ended with the governor's veto would have granted waivers for businesses like car dealerships, pet groomers, and garden centers to reopen, and allowed restaurants to increase the percentage of people allowed to sit indoors. Even when it came to distributing \$3.9 billion in coronavirus-related federal relief funds — an area that seemingly could inspire bipartisanship — there were clashes. In the spring, Wolf and the legislature [agreed to spend \\$2.6 billion](#) on a variety of purposes including relief for long-term care facilities, small businesses, and counties that had not received direct federal aid.

But there was disagreement over how to disperse the remaining \$1.3 billion, with the governor initially signaling that he [preferred to use it](#) for personal protective equipment, child care, and small business loans. In the end, though, Wolf did not convince GOP leaders to fund his plan, and both sides agreed

to [use the remaining](#) money to balance the state budget and pay the salaries of state-employed frontline workers during the coronavirus pandemic.

Christopher Borick, a political science professor at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, said the intense pressure of the looming presidential election colored how elected officials acted in office. “Everything that happened in Pennsylvania last year had the election backdrop there,” Borick said. “That is the nature of electoral politics — it seeps into governing. And that was all the more true in Pennsylvania in 2020.” Not surprisingly, election-related issues were also steeped in partisan divides.

For months, county election officials lobbied for more flexibility in implementing the state’s nascent mail voting law. Ultimately, it was the state Supreme Court — and not the legislature — that greenlighted some of the changes sought by counties, including clarity on using satellite election offices and drop boxes. That, in turn, infuriated the GOP, which believed the Democratic-controlled high court was usurping the legislature’s authority — and playing politics.

But state lawmakers failed to make a critical change that counties were clamoring for: permission to begin [processing mail ballots](#) before Election Day. Had that and other changes with bipartisan support been made, Pennsylvania would have had election results earlier, potentially cutting down on unfounded conspiracy theories of widespread voter fraud fueled by Trump in the aftermath of the election. Those baseless claims about the presidential outcome contributed to the Jan. 6 deadly assault on the U.S. Capitol, where members of Congress were officially counting the Electoral College votes.

Ultimately, the legislature did not pass an election bill Wolf would sign. A flagship Republican [proposal](#) allowing 21 days of pre-canvassing was shortened to three days and banned drop boxes — the latter a non-starter for Democrats. Meg Snead, Wolf’s policy and planning secretary, said in an interview that 2020 was a year marked by heightened partisan politics. She echoed Costa’s belief that the legislature spent too much time fighting over the governor’s authority — including attempting to reopen the economy before administration officials believed it was safe — and undermining the results of the election.

That “noise,” she said, took away from efforts to raise the minimum wage in Pennsylvania, which the administration believes would have helped counter the economic devastation brought on by the pandemic. Wolf has proposed an increase every year since taking office in 2015, but many Republican leaders have consistently opposed a change, believing it should be set at the federal level. “We can go round and round on what the legislature did and did not do,” said Snead, “but ultimately it’s incumbent on us now to look to the future.”

That future is uncertain. When the legislature reconvened last month to launch its new two-year session, it set the tone for a potentially rocky relationship with Wolf, who could be hamstrung by his lame-duck status as he navigates the last two years of his second and final term in the office. And while Trump lost at the top of the ticket, Republicans performed well across the state, keeping their majority in the Senate and expanding their control of the House while snagging two coveted row offices. Leadership in both chambers saw the wins as an affirmation of their approach to the pandemic.

Among the first bills the GOP advanced was one that would give the legislature the power to end a disaster emergency declared by the governor. The bill does not require Wolf’s signature because [it involves amending the state constitution](#), which means voters will ultimately decide its fate. Several GOP lawmakers last month also revived efforts to push through a proposal giving the legislature the power to [draw districts for electing appellate court judges](#). As it stands, those judges run statewide, and many Democrats, including Wolf, oppose a change.

And separately, a House committee launched a series of hearings examining the integrity of the 2020 election and the Wolf administration's role in administering it. Still, the state Senate in January did pass — unanimously — a \$900 million relief package that includes money to help people struggling with rent and utility bills. It also includes \$145 million in grants to small businesses, an idea first floated by the governor.

For his part, Wolf remains optimistic. "I think last year has shown a sort of bitterness that we haven't been used to in American politics, and Pennsylvania hasn't been immune from that," he said recently. "But I think all of us in Harrisburg, regardless of our partisan attachment or how we look at the job, most of us really want to get something done." — **Spotlight PA**

