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The Shenandoah Valley School District will upgrade its wireless network to meet needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. The school board met

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Wednesday and approved the low bid of \$116,202.26 from IntergraONE, Allentown. The board included that the project will be submitted for special E-rate financing.

District Business Manager Anthony P. Demalis Jr. said with the increased need for an enhanced network connectivity, due to education adapting to the pandemic, the existing wireless infrastructure requires an upgrade. "What this will mean is that there will be an additional 88 access points in classrooms and in 10 non-classrooms," Demalis said. "We're also going to add an external access point and a bridge to the bus barn, which will also allow us to have wireless access in the press box (in Veterans Memorial Stadium) if we want. That's a minor thing. The main thing is the access points for the classrooms."

Demalis said there will be additional network switches and uninterruptible power supplies installed. "This is all about the infrastructure of the wireless network, which we have now," he said. "When it was installed, we did not anticipate at the time 800 to 900 wireless devices being used in the school. With all the Chromebooks we had to add, with teachers trying to teach virtually, we don't have enough of a network here to do it to the best of our ability."

According to the State Library of Pennsylvania website: "As a result of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Federal Communications Commission adopted an order May 8, 1997, creating the E-rate program to ensure that schools and libraries have affordable access to advanced telecommunications services. Under the program, discounts ranging from 20% to 90% on telecommunications services, Internet access, and internal connections are provided to eligible schools and libraries."

Demalis said the cost of the bid is the price for everything if the district does not get the E-rate discount, which he said has been basically approved. "We're applying for E-rate and we're almost 100% we're going to get it," he said. "It's a federal subsidy. We have some guidelines we have to follow. However, we're going to do this whether we get E-rate or not. We need this and we can't wait." Demalis said if the E-rate is not approved, the funding will come from Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief money, which are funds received through the federal CARES Act. "It will not be an expense to the (district) general fund or the taxpayers," Demalis said. "The cost will be reimbursed one way or another." – ***Hazleton Standard-Speaker***

When Cambria County officials gathered in Chest Springs for a rural internet ribbon-cutting on Jan. 15, they were celebrating more than a \$1.1 million answer to a COVID-19 challenge. They were marking the completion of a project that they hoped would bring high-speed wireless access to underserved parts of the community – with impact long after the virus wanes. "Our farmers and rural businesses will have an opportunity to operate successful businesses, the same as small businesses in urban and suburban America," Cambria County President Commissioner Thomas Chernisky told The Tribune-Democrat in January. "Folks will be able to complete job applications online. Children will be able to do virtual schoolwork. And seniors will have the opportunity to use telemedicine to access health care."

Over the past several months, federal CARES Act dollars aimed at helping areas overcome COVID-19 issues have enabled both Cambria and Somerset counties to bring high-speed service to areas that lacked that access. And while the moves may not bring widespread coverage to every corner of their rural areas, it's a big step forward, commissioners from both counties have said. "I often say there has to be a silver lining in everything," Somerset President Commissioner Gerald Walker said recently.

Somerset County dedicated more than \$1.7 million to enable high-speed internet access to be expanded in school districts and communities where the service is lacking, although a significant portion is considered "temporary fixes" – such as community hot spots. Cresson-based In the Stix was awarded \$692,000 to add wireless technology to radio towers near Mount Davis, Berlin

and Ogletown, among others, to expand wireless availability up to 10 miles away from the sites.

And another provider, QCOL Inc., added fiber-optic cable in the Lower Turkeyfoot and Addison Township areas that will enable them to expand internet offerings to homes and businesses in the years to come, commissioners said. "That adds the gold standard for broadband to close to one-fifth of the county – that's a huge 'get' for us," Commissioner Colleen Dawson said. "This gives QCOL the backbone to branch off ... and grow it from there." Cambria County also partnered with In The Stix to add broadband transmitting antennas to nine radio tower sites across the northern half of Cambria County.

Separately, both counties are also working with Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission on a six-county effort to expand broadband across a territory that also includes Blair and Bedford counties. That effort received a \$600,000 boost this winter, specifically toward internet service expansion in northeast Somerset County, parts of southeast Somerset and western Bedford, as well as further east in the Huntingdon area. Private partnerships also enabled services to be expanded in several northern Cambria County communities in January. Cable provider Comcast completed a high-speed extension that enables 3,900 more customers to purchase up to one gigabyte per-second broadband service in Chest Township, Clearfield Township, Reade and Dean, as well as the Coalport area in Clearfield County, state Sen. Wayne Langerholc Jr. announced Jan. 24. – ***Johnstown Tribune-Democrat***

Officials with the Economic Growth Connection of Westmoreland County say the region is on track for growth in the coming year, with the expansion of high-speed internet access a top priority. Connection President and CEO Jim Smith, addressing the economic development group's annual meeting last week via Zoom, said events such as the online gathering coupled with the growing demands of workers left to work from home during the pandemic, have only served to underscore the importance of broadband access. "We're facing widespread problems across the county. ... At some spots, access isn't much better than dial up," Smith said.

State Senate Majority Leader Kim Ward, R-Hempfield, told the group help may be on the way in the Biden administration stimulus bill now working its way through Congress. Help can't come too soon, Smith said. He said officials with the Ligonier Valley School District reported that some students have had to sit in parking lots to access wi-fi for schoolwork. In other areas, service is robust. Smith said one of the biggest problems has been learning just where weak spots exist in a market place where providers consider their service maps confidential information and are reluctant to share, Smith said.

Officials knew there were weak spots in the far eastern reaches of the county. But Smith said as demand has grown with an increase in at-home work and school demands during the pandemic, weak spots have surfaced in many communities, even as business and industry place an added priority on high-speed internet as critical infrastructure for growth.

Indeed, it will be integral to the Connection's biggest ever project, the \$5 million Digital Foundry in New Kensington. The new facility, scheduled for construction over the next year, is a joint project of the Richard K. Mellon Foundation, which provided a \$5.5 million grant to underwrite construction, the Economic Growth Connection, the New Kensington Redevelopment Authority and Penn State New Kensington. Officials have touted it has a project that will allow business and industry to create digital twins of their products and connect the emerging workforce with the economy of the future. "High-speed internet is no longer a luxury," Ward said, equating it to critical infrastructure services such as water and sewer service.

Smith said it may be even more important. Ward said the good news is that it appears stimulus package will include money for capital projects such as broadband expansion. "That will help elevate this issue," Ward said, vowing to use her position in the GOP leadership to push local priorities such as broadband. – **Pittsburgh Tribune-Review**

