

"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

~ Harry S. Truman



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March 25, 2021

LightReading
Stimulus projects
poised to offset risk

Comcast Corp. plans to spend \$1 billion over the next decade to help low-income Americans connect to the internet, company officials said Wednesday.

of new broadband regulations – analyst

Washington Post
Republicans set to quiz tech CEOs on election misinformation tweeted #StopTheSteal themselves

Reuters
Tech CEOs back on Capitol Hill, this time to talk about misinformation

Public Citizen
Big Tech, Big Cash: Washington's New Power Players

Variety
Disney Plus Is Hiking Prices for First Time in the U.S. This Week

The Hill
Lawmakers reintroduce legislation to secure internet-connected devices

Politico
Lawmakers rebuff Facebook's proposed internet rules

Spotlight PA
Wolf administration refuses to release details of wasted COVID-19 vaccine doses

The Philadelphia cable giant said the money would go toward wiring community centers with WiFi, donating laptops and computers, awarding grants to nonprofits working with low-income Americans, and continued investment in its Internet Essentials program, a low-cost broadband service. Comcast estimates that the \$1 billion investment could affect 50 million people.

Comcast announced the commitment on the 10th anniversary of Internet Essentials, launched in 2011 as a condition to federal approval of the company's purchase of NBCUniversal. Comcast continued the reduced-cost broadband program beyond its three-year commitment, which would have ended in 2014. The program offers home internet service to low-income customers for \$9.95 a month. "We are rededicating ourselves to this mission to ensure that the next generation of students in America has the tools, resources, and abilities they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world," Dave Watson, CEO of Comcast's cable unit, said in a statement.

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the necessity of internet access, with millions of Americans relying on broadband to work or study from home. A February 2021 survey by Consumer Reports, a consumer advocacy group, found that 76% of Americans agreed that internet service is as important as electricity or water service in today's world. A nearly equal percentage (75%) said they rely on the internet every day.

As the coronavirus closed schools and offices, Comcast offered 60 days of free service for new Internet Essentials customers, opened its vast network of business and outdoor WiFi hot spots for public use, and partnered with school districts to connect kids online. But elected officials and activists have called on Comcast to do more during the crisis, criticizing Internet Essentials' slower speeds and demanding the company open residential WiFi hot spots for school children. The company has said those residential networks were not engineered for broad public use.

Comcast recently doubled download speeds for Internet Essentials to 50 megabits per second (mbps) and increased uploads from 3 to 5 mbps. Download speeds reflect how quickly you can receive data, such as loading web pages or streaming videos. An upload speed is how fast you can send data, such as using a video chat to talk to someone.

The company said the program has connected 10 million people across the country and more than 520,000 Philadelphia residents since 2011, including more than 9,000 who were connected at no cost through PHLConnectED, a partnership including the city and school district. Comcast does not share current enrollment numbers. In Philadelphia, Comcast has opened more than 40 "Lift Zones" — community centers connected to free WiFi — to give students safe spaces for virtual learning while their guardians are occupied. The company aims to open roughly 1,000 across the country by the end of 2021.

Meanwhile, Comcast's broadband business has continued to boom during the pandemic. Its cable unit added a record 1.6 million customers in 2020, helping push its 2020 fourth-quarter profits to \$3.4 billion, an improvement of 6.9% from a year earlier. — ***Philadelphia Inquirer***

The Minnesota Telecom Alliance and the Iowa Communications Alliance have filed a joint petition with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) asking the agency to deny LTD Broadband's long-form application that it submitted in the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) auction. LTD Broadband was the biggest winner in the RDOF auction, which wrapped up late last year. The RDOF auction was a reverse auction that awarded funding for broadband deployments in unserved areas to companies that committed to deploying service for the lowest level of support.

LTD Broadband is slated to receive \$1.3 billion from the government if its long-form application is approved. With that funding, LTD Broadband is supposed to

deploy broadband to unserved areas of 15 states. The company [has pledged to provide gigabit speeds](#) to those rural areas using a combination of fixed wireless access technology and fiber.

In the FCC petition, the Minnesota Telecom Alliance and the Iowa Communications Alliance claim that LTD Broadband's long-form application provides no indication that the company has "the technical, engineering, financial, operational, management, staff, or other resources to meet RDOF's build-out and services obligations with respect to the 21,908 census blocks (114,921 locations) that it won in Minnesota and Iowa."

The petition further asserts that the burden of proof rests with LTD Broadband to demonstrate that it can meet the service obligations in return for the \$311.9 million in RDOF support it is slated to receive in Minnesota and the \$23.2 million it is slated to receive in Iowa. "If LTD is not able to meet its buildout and service obligations for the RDOF I support that it has bid upon, over 100,000 rural Minnesota locations (102,005) and almost 13,000 rural Iowa locations (12,916) will be deprived of urgently needed high-speed broadband access for years," the petition says.

The petition also notes that LTD Broadband currently doesn't offer residential broadband speeds that are close to the RDOF gigabit service tier, which calls for 1 Gbps downstream and 500 Mbps upstream. At deadline, LTD Broadband hadn't responded to questions about this FCC petition. However, CEO Corey Hauer told FierceTelecom in February that the company believes it will be able to deploy fiber faster and more cost-effectively in rural areas because there isn't as much existing infrastructure to worry about. In addition, he said the company will use two methods: in-the-ground and aerial fiber using existing infrastructure such as telephone wires.

It's worth noting that members of both the Minnesota Telecom Alliance and the Iowa Communications Alliance currently provide network connectivity in Minnesota and Iowa by delivering fixed wireless, fiber, copper and cellular broadband services and they are likely to compete with LTD Broadband for customers once LTD deploys its services. In addition, some of the members are in the process of deploying fiber-based networks. – *Fierce Telecom*

The sensible idea of creating a state vaccine czar hasn't caught on. Not surprising.

It came, after all, from the state's sole independent lawmaker, Luzerne County's Sen. John Yudichak. And since all things are seen through the lens of politics, it didn't have enough politics, just common sense. We pick sides and play partisan whack-a-mole with whatever pops up.

As a result, Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf talks about vaccination success and wonderful progress in fighting COVID-19, and Republicans talk about Wolf's failed policies, pandemic miscues and/or impeaching him (which, come on). This is where a Pennsylvania Reality Czar could be of value. He or she would be an independent voice with no dog in the hunt, clutching no ideological loyalties, with no intent of seeking office ever. That way, we'd have an apolitical, nonpartisan source of straight talk.

There was a time this role was filled by media. But nobody trusts media. And when I say "nobody," I mean the largest majority of Americans ever. The annual, since 2000, [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) (Edelman is the world's largest public relations firm) now shows 61 percent of Americans agree "the media is not doing well at being objective and nonpartisan." And 56 percent believe journalists "purposely" seek to mislead people with falsehoods or "gross exaggerations." So, if you want to stop reading now, trust me, I understand. Otherwise, consider the benefits a reality czar could bring to public discourse.

Take bickering over Wolf's pandemic performance. Critics say he failed to protect senior citizens in nursing homes and is mucking up vaccinations for older adults. State Sen. Judy Ward, R-Blair, this week said protecting the state's most-vulnerable-to-coronavirus is, for the administration, "just not a priority." This came right after the [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#) reported that despite administration claims the state is "on par or doing a better job providing first doses than every other state with a large population of older adults," it's actually doing a lousy job at vaccinating seniors.

Based on CDC data, the newspaper noted Pennsylvania ranks 46th in the rate of people 65 and older with first shots. And is doing worse than states with larger 65-and-older populations such as California, Florida and Texas. The administration responded saying its claim was based on all vaccines, and that it was unaware of its ranking related to older adults. A reality czar could note, yeah, well, you can use data to claim pretty much whatever you want. Just like when Pennsylvania earlier said its lagging vaccine rollout was going great -- by using total number of shots dispensed rather than percentage of population vaccinated.

But coronavirus isn't the only area where a reality czar can be useful. [The Republican-run Senate just killed an emergency constitutional amendment](#) to allow, if voters approved, a two-year window for child sex abuse survivors to sue their predators in cases beyond the statutes of limitations. This after the Wolf administration botched the process of getting a regular amendment to do so put on the May 18 Primary Election ballot.

But the issue, said Republicans, is not an emergency (certainly not for them), it's "dereliction of duty" by the Wolf administration. The czar might note the Senate seems to relish hanging messes on Wolf far more than working to fix anything. It's never been the loudest advocate for survivors. Its non-action now not only causes survivors further anguish, it also provides abusers and institutions facing potential litigation with financial protection for who knows how much longer. All that was needed was a merciful change in state law that other states have made.

And how about the pull and tug over election laws? [Republicans nationwide, including in Pennsylvania, are pushing "election integrity," which these days means making voting tougher](#). Here and elsewhere, that includes ending or restricting no-excuse mail-in voting. This, the czar would say, is just politicians doing what they do. Republicans lose a big 2020 election, then seek to change the rules. Just like [Democrats sought to change the rules by killing the Electoral College after losing in 2016](#).

Politics is driven by repeating cycles. Now, the czar wouldn't only dismiss the overly-partisan or outright evil. The czar would also point to the efficacy of seeming triviality. For example, some eyebrows likely hiked this week when acting Health Secretary Alison Beam reminded Pennsylvanians to "be aware of ticks."

Why, as virus cases rise and vaccine issues persist, would our top health officer worry about insects? (Or, as the czar would correctly state, arachnids.) Simple, forgivable and necessary. For the czar would note that while the state trails other states in oh so many things, [it leads the nation in tick-borne disease](#). It'd be good to have a reality czar. – John Baer's column in *Harrisburg Patriot-News*

