



Armstrong Telecommunications was honored Friday by the Greater Allegany County Chamber of Commerce as Large Business of the Year. In front from left are Assemblyman Joseph Giglio and state Sen. George Borrello and Armstrong officials, John Rayeski, Kirk Beaber, Shawn Beqaj and Malanda Cambra. Second from right is Gretchen Hanchett, executive director of the Chamber, while the president of the Chamber, Girard Kelly, is at the far right in the rear.

Kathryn Ross/Olean Times Herald

See article text below.



April 12, 2021

#### Reuters

[Canada's Telesat takes on Musk and Bezos in space race to provide fast broadband](#)

In a warehouse full of broadband equipment the Greater Allegany County Chamber of Commerce honored large and small business and recognized one of its own with annual awards.

#### LightReading

[The billion dollar fight to cross the digital divide gets dirty](#)

Gretchen Hanchett, executive director of the GACC, noted Friday, "We usually have this ceremony at a nice restaurant, but things have changed with COVID-19, so this year Armstrong Telecommunications is hosting it at their facility."

#### Bloomberg

[Apple Working on Combined TV Box, Speaker to Revive Home Efforts](#)

Armstrong, in the county for four years installing fiber-optic cable, is the GACCC Large Business of the Year.

#### Washington Post

[Amazon's win in Alabama is latest victory in power struggle between tech giants, workers](#)

Taking the podium to announce the winners, GACCC member Rod Bieler said, "In partnership with New York state, Armstrong has been working in many parts of Western New York to expand broadband internet access to previously underserved communities. By expanding access to high-speed, affordable and reliable internet, businesses throughout Allegany County are able to establish and grow."

#### Next TV

[FCC's Brendan Carr Blasts Biden's Broadband Billions](#)

Armstrong's (and BCAP Board of Directors member) Shawn Beqaj said the company is almost 70 years old and a family business that originated in Butler, Pa. and now has an office in Addison, Steuben County. "We've gone into the heartland to hook up rural homes with broadband," Beqaj said, adding that it is a \$130 million project — and nearly complete in Allegany County.

#### Bloomberg

[Tech Hubs May Emerge From Covid Richer Than Ever](#)

Once finished in Allegany County, the project will continue in Cattaraugus County. However, once the Belfast warehouse is emptied of equipment, it will be turned into office space for the business. Kirk Beaber, another company representative, told those gathered that the company has installed 2,400 miles of cable and has another 1,500 miles to install before it is finished in Allegany County. He added that there will be 21 broadband hubs throughout the area, with seven located within Allegany County.

State Sen. George Borrello, R-Chautauqua County, and Assemblyman Joe Giglio, R-Gowanda, along with Lee James, a district representative for U.S. Rep. Tom Reed, R-Corning, were on hand for the awards ceremony and they thanked Armstrong for the work its crews have done in the area. The

***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***

**Columnist: Wolf's woes shape 2022**

***Associated Press***  
**Lawmakers aim to limit state emergency powers**

Chamber's Small Business Award was given to Four Points, Inc., an insurance agency out of Rochester that has helped the Chamber offer low-cost insurance to its members businesses and employees.

Founder Cody Mangalsingh told those at the ceremony, "We're an agency that is large enough to matter, but small enough to care." He thanked the Chamber for recognizing the business, which has various locations in the eastern United States. Chamber board member Corinna McKnight received the President's Award. – ***Olean (NY) Times Herald***

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For the 30 million Americans without reliable internet access, President Joe Biden's \$100 billion proposal to expand rural broadband and make it more affordable — a major plank of his infrastructure plan [unveiled near Pittsburgh](#) last month — promises to be a bipartisan panacea for a long-standing source of inequality. But the success of Mr. Biden's plan to quickly reach every home or business would hinge largely on the government's ability to dole out the funding accurately and efficiently — a monumental task that federal officials are beginning in earnest this year.

Officials at the Federal Communications Commission face challenges with data gaps in the country's broadband coverage maps that underpin decisions on what places should receive money, which already has begun flowing. In December, the FCC auctioned off \$9.2 billion to companies across the country to expand high-speed internet to 5.2 million homes and businesses, the first phase of the commission's \$20 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund.

Across 17 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania, the FCC awarded nearly \$115 million to eight companies to expand internet access to nearly 51,000 homes and businesses. The FCC is funding the projects over 10 years and demanding that companies connect their assigned locations in six years or less. The government funding aims to help companies undertake expensive projects for a sparsely populated customer base. "The economics in some of these areas are extremely poor when it comes to deploying fiber because it's so labor-intensive," said Thomas Whitehead, vice president of federal government affairs for Windstream Communications. "So we absolutely need government support in order to be able to accomplish that goal."

The Arkansas-based telecommunications provider serves mostly rural areas across 17 states, including rugged areas of Western Pennsylvania. Windstream received more than \$57 million from the FCC to connect 17,927 homes and businesses in southwestern Pennsylvania — about \$3,200 per connection, according to FCC data. In Greene County alone, Windstream received \$14 million to connect 2,879 homes and businesses — a cost of nearly \$5,000 per connection, one of the highest rates of any location in the region.

Universal broadband service has long been a goal of the federal government, which has offered an array of resources. At least 14 federal agencies offer grants, loans or other forms of aid across 57 individual broadband programs, according to a list [published last year](#) by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. The FCC, established by the Communications Act of 1934, was mandated with carrying out universal service programs, which in the 20th century ensured that telephone service reached rural areas.

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The FCC, established by the Communications Act of 1934, was mandated with carrying out universal service programs, which in the 20th century ensured that telephone service reached rural areas. “The thing that’s exciting,” Mr. Doyle said, is the plan calls for “bringing 21st-century broadband — to not settle for just what’s available but to get fiber into these under-served areas, so that as we transition to 5G and as new things come up, the infrastructure exists in the country for that.”

But Republicans so far have opposed Mr. Biden’s infrastructure plan, which proposes to raise the corporate tax rate to pay for it. “President Biden’s so-called infrastructure plan fails to bridge the digital divide,” stated Rep. John Joyce, R-Blair, whose district is largely rural and is slated for broadband projects aided by tens of millions of FCC funding released in December. “By implementing new regulations on broadband deployment, the president’s infrastructure plan would discourage innovation and hinder efforts to expand access to high speed internet in rural communities,” Mr. Joyce said in a statement.

Rep. Guy Reschenthaler, R-Peters, representing Washington, Greene and Westmoreland counties, said in a statement that he supports investment in broadband as part of a “targeted” infrastructure plan, but called Mr. Biden’s plan “preposterous.” Rep. Glenn Thompson, R-Centre, stated that broadband “has been a bipartisan priority for years, and it’s paramount that we make substantial investments in rural connectivity.” But Mr. Biden tax hike and regulations concern him.

Free-market advocates argue that government funding and ownership of broadband put taxpayers on the hook for universal service projects that have a checkered history of success. “Good intentions aside, it often doesn’t produce good outcomes,” said Jessica Melugin, a researcher with the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a Washington libertarian think tank promoting free markets. Mr. Biden’s plan stated that it would prioritize funding broadband networks owned or operated by municipalities or nonprofits, a move that would hamper the private sector’s ability to roll out new technologies to reach communities, Ms. Melugin said.

The Biden plan “feels like a quick fix to some people, but the evidence says something different,” she said. “You’re talking about decades of delay at the FCC for rolling out cellphone technology and things like that.” The FCC has moved ahead with major funding initiatives. In August 2019, the five-member commission, then controlled by appointees of then-President Donald Trump, voted unanimously to dole out more than \$20 billion of Universal Service Fund subsidies over the next 10 years as part of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund.

In tandem with new funding, the FCC has tried to correct the inaccurate coverage maps by collecting better information from broadband providers. The FCC historically has asked providers to report coverage information that fits

into census-derived blocks — areas that can range from a city block to a sweeping area of rural farmland. By that system, an entire census block could be classified as served by broadband even if only one household has access.

Mr. Doyle's panel [drew up legislation in 2019](#) that required the FCC to fix the maps. The measures required the FCC to collect and disseminate more granular broadband data, allow the commission to use crowdsourced feedback on coverage areas, and establish a new office to serve as a central command center for mapping efforts. They also made it illegal for providers to knowingly file false broadband information and create a system by which private and public entities could challenge data submitted to the commission. The measures passed Congress, and Mr. Trump signed it into law in March 2020.

A new FCC broadband mapping task force was created to overhaul the maps and create multiple systems to accommodate crowdsourcing and complaints, a senior FCC official said in an interview last week. The task force received funding to start its mission only last December, the official said. "It's a complicated and challenging process, but I think it's one that really is overdue," the official said. "We have been struggling with the existing maps for a number of years and trying to base funding decisions on them." — ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***

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As schools in the region shut down a year ago with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stephanie A. Keebler worried about how teachers would reach students with lessons. Ms. Keebler, superintendent of the Titusville Area School District in Crawford County, polled families and found that a quarter of the district's 2,100 students did not have reliable internet access in an educational system covering 200 square miles. Worse, broadband access was unavailable for students at two of the district's elementary schools. "When you look at internet access for education, health care, and, frankly, for everyday use, it becomes a basic skill you should have access to," she said. "We have families who absolutely can afford it and can't get it. There's just not service."

Last year's lockdowns added urgency to expand broadband access in rural Pennsylvania, including Titusville, about 100 miles north of Pittsburgh. President Joe Biden's \$100 billion proposal to connect every American to the internet over the next eight years could speed up those plans while creating new sources of funding. "We recognize the economic and social issues around broadband access," said Zachary Norwood, planning director at the Crawford County Planning Commission, which has been leading the broadband expansion effort. "The pandemic sort of kicked it into high gear."

School and business closures related to the pandemic spotlighted the digital divide that marks much of rural Pennsylvania, where internet speeds are often slow when the service is available at all. Portable hot spots have been used by school districts and others to create access in remote areas, but with mixed results. "The pandemic really shined a light on the whole problem," said Zachary Lee, regional planner at the Altoona-based Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission, which is trying to bring broadband access to six rural Central Pennsylvania counties.

In September, the commission created the nonprofit Alleghenies Broadband Inc. to drive the effort while extending service to about 4,000 residents in parts of Somerset and Huntingdon counties while seeking grant funding to expand online access in Bedford County. Like Southern Alleghenies, Crawford County's plans began well before Mr. Biden was elected. By June, the Crawford County Planning Commission is expected to have a draft plan for expanding internet access to the county commissioners for review. If adopted, a public-private partnership would extend service to more than 9,700 households, or about 28.3% of the total homes in Crawford County.

Only about 75% of the county has access to the internet at the federally defined minimum speed, according to a Penn State University study. But the initiative would boost speedy access to 95% of the county, including 21



schools, three airports and nine volunteer fire departments. Crawford County, which has joined in the effort with private internet service providers, schools and local businesses, would use fiber optic cable, transmission towers and wireless transmitters, sometimes placed atop silos and barns, to extend service. A final cost estimate is still being worked out, said Ron Mattocks, who owns a marketing company and chairs the planning commission's broadband committee. "Limited connectivity literally keeps you disconnected from what's going on," Mr. Maddocks said. "It puts people at a real disadvantage" and hurts businesses by making them less competitive.

Speedy internet can have a big impact on economic development, according to a study by the University of Tennessee, which looked at the financial impact of fiber broadband access on the city of Chattanooga. The study found that the city realized a \$2.7 billion economic boost between 2011 and 2020 as the result of the installation. "I shouldn't be relegated to bad broadband because of my ZIP code," said Gary Bolton, president and CEO of Fiber Broadband Association, a trade group based in Washington, D.C. "I think this is exactly what rural Pennsylvania is looking for."

Mr. Biden's vision for extending broadband service in the U.S., including to some 30 million people who live in areas with slow or no service, may be found in legislation introduced to Congress in March. It earmarks \$80 billion for infrastructure; \$1 billion in state grants to "close gaps in broadband adoption;" and \$2 billion to enable students without internet at home to participate in remote learning. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn, D-S.C., are sponsors of the Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act.

If the bill becomes law — and it still faces an uphill battle in Congress — it could push the U.S. closer to universal internet access, according to Sasha Meinrath, who holds the Palmer Chair in Telecommunications at Penn State University. "There's still a lot to be disclosed before we'll really know if this is a great plan or not," Mr. Meinrath said. "But making the issue a priority is a great leap forward. It's not going to get us there, but it'll be a big shift forward in getting universal access." — **Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

