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Editorial: Legislators, show us the receipts for your expenses

A broadband initiative in Bedford County has officially launched to expand internet services to unserved and underserved areas throughout the county. The broadband initiative, called "Speed Zone" was launched by the Bedford County Commissioners in partnership with Alleghenies Broadband, Inc. (ABI). Speed Zone will follow a "fluid, master plan" that will identify projects through 2023 that include fixed wireless, fiber and new emerging technologies.

The first phase of the development started in 2020 through federal CARES Act funding; wireless broadband equipment on existing 911 towers were fixed. In addition, a $1.5 million grant proposal was submitted to the Appalachian Regional Commission for the construction of additional telecommunications towers in the southern part of Bedford County.

According to the Bedford County Commissioners Office, a new solicitation for proposals is currently being circulated by ABI to begin work on the next phase of the master plan. The next phase encompasses a public-private partnership where applicants who are awarded funding through the request for proposals will receive ongoing support and services from ABI, which will include grant monitoring and assisting with marketing and outreach.

Eligible projects require the delivery of minimum speeds of 100 Mbps download and 100 Mbps upload. If it is impractical to meet those speeds due to geography, financial costs, etc. then speeds must meet 100 Mbps for download and at least 20 Mbps for upload speed. This must be scalable to 100 upload and 100 download, according to the commissioners' office. "The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for widespread reliable broadband," the Bedford County Commissioners said in a news release. "The lack of accessibility made remote education, work, and health care difficult, and sometimes impossible. With the plethora of funding resources currently available to assist with rural broadband, it is imperative to capitalize on the opportunities to target investments wisely and to maximize the amount of state and federal subsidies secured for projects in Bedford County." – ***WTAJ-TV, Altoona***

ViacomCBS Inc and Comcast Corp can succeed without acquiring other businesses, IAC Chairman Barry Diller said during a Reuters Newsmaker event Thursday. The media and Internet mogul, who helped found Fox Broadcasting Company, described competing with Netflix which would require significant investment, a "fool's errand" at this point. "But can you do very well for yourself and for your shareholders if you simply have good ideas, execute them well?" he said. "There will be buyers, there will be an audience for those things. Absolutely."

Diller's comments came as media experts expect a fresh round of mergers following the recently announced deal between Discovery Inc and AT&T, which will create a new company that combines Discovery and WarnerMedia assets. Soon after Discovery and AT&T revealed their plans for the proposed new company, Warner Brothers Discovery, Amazon.com Inc. announced it will buy U.S. movie studio MGM.

Although conglomerate IAC is not currently weighted heavily toward media - with investments that include MGM Resorts International and Care.com - Diller has a long history in the sector. He described Comcast as being in a "fantastic position" with a cable and broadband business

that hedges against NBCUniversal. “I don’t think they have to do anything,” he said of whether Comcast needs to spin off a business or get bigger.

The Internet and media mogul brushed off concerns about Netflix’s debt burden. “Unless they do something just remarkably stupid, just declare them a winner and go home,” Diller said, speculating that subscriber revenue will eventually line up with production costs, delivering a “very nice return for investors.” – ***Reuters***

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick said this year that “it is vitally important that we build a bridge and put together bipartisan legislation that is both responsive to local needs and worthy of the public’s trust.” Our congressman, who is a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, was exactly right.

President Joe Biden’s so-called infrastructure scheme, chock full of provisions that have nothing to do with infrastructure and hundreds of billions for special-interest projects that serve the well-connected few, would achieve none of that. Combined, the “American Jobs Plan” and “American Families Plan,” which the administration is selling as one “hard” and “human” infrastructure proposal in an attempt to make them more palatable, would cost in excess of $4 trillion. That’s almost as much as the entire federal government spent in the last pre-pandemic fiscal year. It also would impose more than $2 trillion in new corporate taxes that would pass costs to working families and small businesses that can ill afford them as our economy emerges from COVID-19 lockdowns.

Instead of focusing on infrastructure, it’s a partisan wish list; only about 6% of the spending would go to roads and bridges. More than $1 trillion would be wasted on corporate welfare that hands out sweetheart deals to favored businesses and industries, such as subsidies to insurance companies and incentives for electric vehicles, both of which disproportionately benefit the affluent, and neither of which would meaningfully expand access to affordable, quality health care, or improve the environment. What the corporate welfare provisions wouldn’t do is lay a single mile of highway or rebuild a single bridge. This proposal is shovel ready alright, but it’s shoveling something other than asphalt. Even with the loose definition of “infrastructure” that supporters use, as little as one-quarter of the spending would qualify.

Proponents of this boondoggle claim it could create 2.7 million jobs. Given the dubious track record of massive federal projects to deliver promised jobs, that number is suspect. Either way, at an estimated more than $800,000 a job it would be an incredible waste of taxpayers’ money. Certainly, some of the non-infrastructure provisions included in the measure might have merit. If so, they can be considered on their own. They should not be hitching a ride on an unrelated bill and sold as “infrastructure.”

But the deceptiveness doesn’t end there. The plan calls for a “temporary” 15-year corporate tax increase to pay for eight years of spending. It won’t come close to covering the full cost. The rest would be borrowed, jacking up the nearly $30 trillion national debt even more. Our kids and grandkids will pick up that tab. Let’s be clear. Americans for Prosperity and many other opponents of this spending plan agree we

need infrastructure reform. And there are numerous ways to achieve it that don't involve wasting several trillion dollars on political favors.

Let's start with spending the gas taxes we already collect on roads and bridges, instead of diverting billions to other projects. Pennsylvania, which has one of the highest gasoline taxes in the country, spends almost one-third of its federal and state gas tax revenue on something other than highways.
Instead of having federal officials deciding how transportation dollars are spent in Pennsylvania, how about moving those decisions closer to home? We know much better than someone sitting in an office in Washington what our transportation priorities are. We're the ones driving on these roads every day.

We can also get more bang for our buck if Washington would stop needlessly inflating project costs through unnecessary regulations and restrictive labor rules such as the Depression-era Davis-Bacon Act, which limits competitive bidding for federal construction projects and leads to avoidable waste of taxpayer dollars. Repealing Davis-Bacon alone could save almost $11 billion over 10 years. These effective, bipartisan proposals are nowhere to be found in the administration's plan. Some of the alternatives that have been floated would waste less money and focus more on roads and bridges, but they too miss the opportunity for the kind of reform that would make for a better, more cost-effective process. The idea should be not just to spend less, but to spend more wisely. – **Op-ed from Americans for Prosperity-Pennsylvania in *Philadelphia Inquirer***

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