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Atlantic Broadband, the eighth-largest cable operator in the U.S., will partner with state and local officials in Maryland to extend the availability of broadband internet in Queen Anne's and St. Mary's Counties. The expansion project will extend broadband internet to 230 homes and businesses in the two counties.

The \$815,000 expansion project is being funded through a \$480,000 state grant administered by the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development's Office of Statewide Broadband (OSB). The remainder of the project will be funded by Atlantic Broadband with support from the counties. "Atlantic Broadband supports the State's goal of bringing internet connectivity to as many households and businesses in Maryland as possible," said William Newborg, Director of Grants and Funding for Atlantic Broadband. "The extension of our facilities into previously unserved areas of these communities has been made possible through these cooperative partnerships at the state and local level."

Atlantic Broadband plans to build to portions of Granny Branch Road, Price Station Road, Massey Avenue, Hayden Avenue, Hayden Estates Subdivision, Willow Branch and Cuff's Hollow Subdivision in Queen Anne's County and Foxes Point Lane, Big Chestnut, Gum Landing Drive, Bushwood Wharf Road and Burnt Mill Drive in St. Mary's County. "We are pleased to partner with Atlantic Broadband to extend broadband's reach at a time when reliable, high-speed connectivity is essential for daily life and work," said St. Mary's County Commissioner President Randy Guy.

Construction is scheduled to begin in Queen Anne's County in August, while pre-construction walkout and design is scheduled to begin in St. Mary's County in September, with construction beginning later this year. – **ABB news release**

Telecommunications industry groups and digital equity advocates reacted positively Monday to high-speed internet provisions in the Senate's bipartisan infrastructure bill. The massive 2,702-page bill, introduced late Sunday night as a substitute amendment to the legislative vehicle, includes about \$65 billion in spending for broadband.

And though the bottom line for broadband spending is significantly lower than the \$100 billion originally sought by President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats, almost everyone has found something to like. Industry groups, for example, were quick to praise the lower overall funding level. The call for \$100 billion in broadband spending had led to some concerns of "overbuilding." "Early proposals from the administration indicated an intent to transform broadband into an old-fashioned utility through massive, wasteful overbuilding," said Doug Brake, director of broadband policy at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation. "Significant improvements ... have brought it much closer to something ITIF could support."

The bulk of funding for high-speed internet would go toward broadband implementation grants. The grants would total about \$42.5 billion that states and territories could use for broadband projects in unserved areas, with 10 percent of the funds set aside for projects in "high-cost" areas. The figure is about \$2.5 billion more than what had been in earlier drafts of the agreement circulated last week.

Advocates who say digital equity programs are key to closing the "digital divide," which is especially damaging to low-income families and racial minorities, are applauding the inclusion of \$2.75 billion to implement the Digital Equity Act. The bill would direct the Commerce Department to award broadband grants in historically underserved communities. "Just the idea that an infrastructure bill is including funding for digital equity and adoption is big,"

said Heather Gate, the vice president of digital inclusion at Connected Nation, a Bowling Green, Ky.-based national nonprofit.

Gate said she would have preferred a greater investment in digital equity, but the \$2.75 billion is "significant considering we're coming from zero for equity funding." The digital equity funding would be awarded via two new Commerce Department grant programs: the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program, which would receive \$1.5 billion, and the Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program, which would get \$1.25 billion.

The first of the two programs would disburse funding based on a state's population, demographics and current broadband availability. The second would provide grants to specific projects aimed at digital equity and inclusion. And \$5 billion more would be authorized for state grants that would go toward "middle mile" broadband projects to connect networks operated by major providers and smaller, rural networks operated by smaller providers.

The "middle mile" provisions won plaudits from the Wireless Infrastructure Association, which said the money could be used to finance signal towers in rural or underserved areas where they would otherwise be too expensive to build. "This should be a boon for tower builders," said the group's president, Jonathan Adelstein. "Best of all, it includes an explicit priority we've advocated strongly, which is leveraging existing towers and other infrastructure rather than wasting taxpayer resources by overbuilding."

The bill also includes \$2 billion for the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program and \$2 billion for rural broadband. "This unparalleled commitment will help community-based and Tribal providers of broadband bring more connectivity to Americans who lack internet access and enable those who cannot afford access to bridge that gap with government support," said Mike Wendy, a spokesperson for the Wireless Internet Service Providers Association.

Negotiators also agreed to expand the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, which Congress established in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to help low-income families afford their monthly internet bill. The bill would extend the program past the end of the public health emergency but would lower the monthly stipend from \$50 to \$30.

The bill also includes provisions increasing price transparency and ending the practice of "digital redlining," which has resulted in lower-income areas being served slower internet speeds for higher prices. Both provisions were key priorities for the Biden administration. "Broadband internet is necessary for Americans to do their jobs, to participate equally in school learning, health care, and to stay connected," the White House said last week. The deal "ensures every American has access to reliable high-speed internet." –

Tribune News Service

In public testimony to the panel of leaders who will soon redraw Pennsylvania's state legislative lines and determine the next 10 years of political territory in Harrisburg, two of the state's biggest advocates for fair redistricting said the maps should be a result of intensive public input and a keen eye toward keeping communities intact.

Voters across the state currently wonder why their precincts are split, why they need to "go through two, sometimes three other districts to get to their legislators' office" and how elections are decided far before they have the opportunity to cast a ballot, Fair Districts PA chair Carol Kuniholm told the Legislative Reapportionment Commission on Tuesday. To get the drawing right once the key census data is available later this month, the commission should prioritize keeping communities of interest compact — uniting neighborhoods or areas that have "shared culture, history and political concerns" in an effort to keep them under the same lawmaker, added Common Cause of Pennsylvania executive director Khalif Ali.

Ms. Kuniholm, testifying to the commission that includes University of Pittsburgh Chancellor Emeritus Mark Nordenberg and other legislative leaders tasked with redrawing the district boundaries for 50 state Senate and 203 state House seats, said every district map is shaped by the value of those who draw it, and alleged that even a “cursory look” at the current maps show that constitutional values have been consistently ignored. That has included keeping districts compact and contiguous. “The values that have shaped our district maps are more often incumbent protection, power of leadership over individual legislators and manipulation of lines to ensure a lasting legislative advantage for the party with the final say in drawing district maps,” Ms. Kuniholm told the commission.

Soliciting meaningful input from citizens is the best approach to remedy the issues, Ms. Kuniholm said, because a district that may look to be compact on paper may actually make it difficult for voters to get from one side to the other. Her group is just finishing a map-drawing contest in which citizen mappers are asked to use values like compactness, contiguity and “avoiding partisan bias” to draw boundaries.

The maps will be reviewed and shared across Pennsylvania for comment and will be submitted as testimony to the commission as a “benchmark” for any maps they propose, Ms. Kuniholm said. “What we’ve learned is that even a high school mapper can accomplish all of those goals with better metrics than the current PA house and senate maps. And we’ve learned that citizen mappers, even those new to the task, can complete good maps in a matter of days,” Ms. Kuniholm said.

Mr. Ali urged the commission to educate the public on the issue of redistricting through paid advertising to help reach people who “have historically been left out of the redistricting conversation.” He also asked the legislators to hold their own town halls and social media. He also stressed the importance of keeping communities together — defined by “members of that community, not by academics or advocates from outside.” That’s why public hearings are essential, he said. “For too long, redistricting has been conducted as a political game with partisan winners and losers,” Mr. Ali said. “While it is undeniable that there are direct political impacts from redistricting, focusing on communities — not just municipal boundaries — is an important part of ensuring that ‘we the people’ are at the center of the process.”

The commission will hold a hearing Wednesday to “gather feedback from Pennsylvania citizens” regarding reapportionment. It held a similar hearing Tuesday evening after the first session. – ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***; [***more in Allentown Morning Call***](#)

