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A \$395,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission is expected to increase broadband options for potentially thousands of businesses and residents in parts of Cattaraugus, Allegany and Chautauqua counties. In addition, partnerships with Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties and private providers will double the investment to \$790,000, according to Southern Tier West Regional Planning and Development Executive Director Richard Zink.

The targets of the broadband expansion are census blocks in the three counties represented by satellite provider HughesNet. Southern Tier Wireless and DF Communications are the providers. "It's important to

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get as much high-speed internet as we can," Zink said. "We aren't going into Armstrong or Spectrum territory."

Southern Tier Wireless and DF Communications will be buying eight new antennas that can go through trees better than the existing WiMax antennas. "We'll be able to serve a lot more houses this way," Zink explained. New cable will also be purchased. WiMax is a microwave-based system that relies on a line-of-sight between the tower antenna and the receiver.

The initial focus of the program through the ARC grant targets 206 businesses, 121 farms and 10 tourism destinations, Zink said. There are 3,300 homes and businesses on company waiting lists which are in the viewshed, but have obstructions that limit the reach of high-speed internet. Currently, the two companies have about 1,000 internet customers in the three counties. "It's a pretty wide service area," Zink said. It extends from the central and northwest portions of Allegany County, to the northeast and northwest corners of Cattaraugus County, and northern Chautauqua County.

An expansion in the southeastern corner of Chautauqua County should also serve the Randolph, South Valley and Conewango areas, he said. "We would not have received the award if Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties had not agreed to partner with us," Zink said. "It's a welcome effort." Chautauqua County will invest about \$150,000, while Cattaraugus County will provide \$70,000.

This new equipment will enable delivery of effective capacity and cost competitive Wi-Fi broadband service in underserved and unserved areas of eight rural communities in the three counties. The ARC statement said, "The counties have been adversely affected by the closure of coal-fired power plants and the decline in freight rail volume due to reduced coal traffic."

The installation of new antennas on eight existing cell towers and the construction of a new tower will provide high-speed, low latency coverage to over 1,100 locations. Zink said he expects engineering work would take place over the winter and installation of equipment to begin in the spring. – *Olean (NY) Times Herald*

Speed, security and the possibility of future high-tech endeavors, like providing wireless hot spots in the city's neighborhoods, are some of the reasons Easton officials are exploring the possibility of installing a fiber optic cable network. Information Technology Manager Frank Caruso shared plans with City Council Tuesday evening that include hiring a local company to install a private, fiber optic cable network around the city's central business district. It would provide a fast and secure internet connection for City Hall, the police, central fire and public works departments, while also offering the capability to eventually feed fiber optic cable into other parts of the city, Caruso said.

A fiber optic cable contains strands of glass fibers. Each customer is assigned their own strand, which is far more secure than typical internet connections shared by multiple users, Caruso explained. They're designed for long-distance, high-performance data networking and telecommunications. Compared to wired cables, fiber

optic cables provide higher bandwidth and can transmit data over longer distances, [according to the website Lifewire](#). “Our bandwidth will be 10 times faster than what we are doing right now, and the need is there because of all the voice and camera traffic we have right now. The need is only going to get more,” Caruso said.

It would allow the city to provide free wireless hot spots, [a goal officials identified last year](#) when the five-year [American Community Survey](#) showed that 27% of city households don’t have an internet subscription. Mayor Sal Panto Jr. originally wanted to see if Easton could find a service provider to offer reduced-cost internet subscriptions to residents, but the city couldn’t find a willing company, Caruso said. The next best option is offering free wireless hot spots at certain times of the day, but “we don’t have a good backbone to launch wireless for the city right now,” Caruso said.

A fiber optic cable would allow the city to do so. A local provider would construct and maintain the network. The city would sign on as a customer, Caruso explained. It’s too early to say how much the project would cost, but Caruso hopes to see it implemented between 2020-2021.

Caruso has been in contact with companies like RCN, Service Electric Cable TV & Communications, Comcast and T-Mobile about building a loop around the central business district, which is bordered by Larry Holmes Drive and portions of Bushkill Street, Pearl Street and Sixth Street. The more customers who sign on, the more attractive the network would be for prospective companies, said Caruso, who plans to meet with Northampton County officials to gauge their interest.

Panto said the fiber optic loop would also be beneficial to private businesses seeking a more secure connection, and he believes it would make the city an attractive destination for high-tech companies. Caruso said he isn’t aware of whether other municipalities in the Lehigh Valley rely on private optic fiber networks. “We will be able to support new and innovative products with our private fiber network,” said City Administrator Luis Campos. Other plans for the proposed network include installing upgraded traffic cameras.

The city does have security cameras at its intersections, but newer models transmit a cleaner image and have the technology to automatically alert police officers who might be looking for a specific vehicle, Campos said. Such a system could also allow the city to boost wireless signals during big events like Garlicfest and Baconfest, when crowds of people on their cellphones bog down data speeds, he said. The new system could also lessen the city’s technology costs.

The bandwidth and distance capability of fiber means that fewer cables are needed, fewer repeaters, less power and less maintenance. In addition, fiber is unaffected by the interference of electromagnetic radiation which makes it possible to transmit information and data with less noise and error, according to the [Fiber Optic Association](#).

Other technology projects the city is working on include a new website to launch later this year, and [RAVE, a mass-communications system](#) that will replace Nixle in January. The city contracted with Nixle to provide emergency alerts to residents last year, but RAVE will have several upgrades for the same annual cost of \$5,000, Campos said.

RAVE allows users to sign up for either text alerts, or voice messages that can be left on a landline. Nixle only offers text messages to a user's cellphone. Residents can also register multiple family members at one time and include information about whether there are senior citizens or people with medical issues in the home. That information can be transmitted to emergency responders if there's an incident in the home, Caruso said. — **Allentown Morning Call**

The Greene County commissioners are receiving \$50,000 from the federal government to study the county's broadband service. The Appalachian Regional Commission announced the grant Tuesday as part of a total of \$44.4 million it was distributing to governments, nonprofits and other entities in nine states as part of the POWER Initiative.

POWER – which stands for Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization – is aimed at offsetting the economic effects of the ongoing demise of the coal industry. ARC said in a summary of the Greene project that the county identified a need for expanded broadband access when it developed a new comprehensive plan last year. “The feasibility study will review the county's broadband assets, conduct a field survey of existing broadband access, determine customer demand, identify the best technology options for service gaps, and develop an implementation matrix,” according to the agency. — **Washington (PA) Observer-Reporter**

Tamaqua area residents are experiencing major AT&T network issues. Over the last two days, AT&T cellphone service has essentially been nonexistent in Tamaqua. Calls can't be made and texts can't be sent.

Many residents are reaching out to the provider and there seems to be varying feedback as to why nobody's device will work. One of AT&T's responses, according to a Facebook post, was that there needs more complaints to escalate the issue. Mark McCaroll of Tamaqua works from home and makes many daily dials, which is difficult to do without service. “The rep told me that yes, they were aware of the outage,” he said. “She said that they were in the process of repairing, but it is a major tower/parts issue and they will probably need to get someone up on the tower to do repairs; ETA is 4 p.m. tomorrow (Thursday).”

Representatives at the AT&T store in Tamaqua confirmed that there are tower problems. Many troubled customers stopped at the local venue on Wednesday to try and get answers. However, the store reps were not given an estimated resolution time by their corporate peers. Another Tamaqua AT&T customer called the 1-800 number and was told that they've been working on the tower since Sept. 26 to replace the “degraded network,” which is scheduled to be completed by Thursday night. “That's all the lady on the phone could tell me,” said Scott Cramer of Tamaqua. “She said it was scheduled to be completed by Oct. 10, and that could mean up to midnight.” The AT&T Customer Care number is 1-800-331-0500. — **Lehighton Times News**

AT&T Inc. has agreed to sell its Puerto Rican and U.S. Virgin Islands businesses to Liberty Latin America Ltd. for \$1.95 billion in cash, allowing the telecommunications giant to shave its debt load and move closer to repurchasing shares. AT&T's operation in Puerto Rico provides cellular, landline and internet connections. It had 1.1 million wireless subscribers. As part of the deal, about 1,300 AT&T employees will be transferred to Liberty Latin America.

The two companies said they expect the deal to close within six to nine months. The Wall Street Journal earlier Wednesday reported the companies had agreed to a deal. Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands account for a small sliver of AT&T's domestic operations, but shedding the unit will help it work down a large debt load accumulated through its \$80 billion-plus acquisition of Time Warner last year. The deal signals progress on AT&T's goal of selling noncore assets, something activist investor Elliott Management Corp., which recently disclosed a stake in the company, is also pushing. AT&T has also sold its stake in streaming service Hulu.

On Wednesday, AT&T said the deal brings to more than \$11 billion the amount of money it will have raised from asset sales this year. The company said it expects to return to repurchasing shares in the fourth quarter, along with debt reduction. Liberty is already the biggest pay-TV and broadband provider on the island. Cable tycoon John Malone, who holds a 25.5% voting stake in Liberty Latin America, and Liberty Latin America CEO Balan Nair have told investors they would like to expand in the region through disciplined mergers and acquisitions.

AT&T has been looking to sell the Puerto Rico business for months and initially sought a valuation closer to \$3 billion, according to people familiar with the matter. Liberty plans to finance the cash deal in large part by raising debt against the combined operation. AT&T originally entered Puerto Rico in 2009 after it acquired Centennial Communications Corp., a rural telecom company with a large share of revenue from the island, for under \$1 billion.

The complexity of the Puerto Rican unit slowed negotiations. Thousands of residents of the commonwealth spend several months out of the year on the U.S. mainland, for example, which made difficult the job of counting subscribers, according to another person familiar with the matter. The island also was heavily damaged in 2017 by Hurricane Maria. Liberty Latin America is a publicly traded telecom and cable provider that operates in Chile, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean and other countries in Latin America. The company spun out last year from Liberty Global, the international cable operator headed by Mr. Malone. The Latin America operator currently has a market value of about \$3 billion. — *Wall Street Journal*

