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Homes and businesses in one portion of Moreland Township, which is part of the East Lycoming School District will have access to high speed internet service because of a \$2.5 million grant awarded to SEDA-Council of Governments on behalf of four local counties. Although we are not aware of the specifics of the SEDA-COG project, we are thrilled that additional homes in the East Lycoming School District will have access to high speed broadband," said Michael Pawlik, East Lycoming's superintendent, commenting on the grant. The service will be available to over 1,500 households, including over 20 businesses in areas in Lycoming, Clinton, Northumberland and Union.

The Appalachian Regional Commission POWER grant funds internet expansion to unreached areas in those counties It will supplement \$4 million in SEDA-COG's revolving loan funds with the selected internet service provider matching these funds with \$1.5 million of private investment funds. Funding by SEDA-COG will be provided through reimbursable grants and low interest loans to incentivize an internet service provider to expand internet service into unserved and underserved rural regions of the counties where it would otherwise economically infeasible.

Specific areas which will be reached by county include:

- Clinton – 360 homes and seven businesses in the area east of Loganton and Bucktail Medical Center in Renovo comprising 14 miles of fiber in a seven mile area.
- Lycoming – 190 homes and five businesses in Moreland Township comprising 16 miles of fiber in a seven mile area.
- Northumberland – 240 homes and seven businesses in the Route 147 area south of Sunbury to Fishers Ferry. This includes Upper and Lower Augusta and Rockefeller townships, comprising 15 miles of fiber in a six mile area.
- Union – 750 homes and five businesses in Mazeppa and Kelly Township comprising 15 miles of fiber in an eight mile area.

"We've learned the importance of the internet during the pandemic," said Rich Ridgway, Columbia County Commissioner and SEDA-COG board president. "It's important in our business and private lives not to mention our school students. Hopefully, this will make everyone's lives less stressful moving forward," he added. – ***Williamsport Sun-Gazette***

It took some doing but the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission has found the sweet spot in balancing the competing interests of pay-as-you-go protocols versus the real-time, real-life struggles of those ensnared in the economic fallout of COVID-19.

After a few months of deadlock, the PUC settled on a decision in early October: End the across-the-board moratorium on utility shutoff but create a protected class of customers at or below 300% of federal poverty guidelines, so long as those customers avail themselves of other assistance programs available to them. The pending Nov. 9 end to the broad moratorium had to happen at some point. Otherwise, the PUC would have set the utility companies up for their own set of financial problems and could have been potentially complicit to customers' racking up of a mountain of debt that could have proved, in time, to be insurmountable.

When the moratorium on utility shutoffs was put in place in mid-March, fingers were crossed that the brunt of COVID-19 would be in the rearview mirror within a season. Then came summer without its fireworks, then September without

full-on face-to-face education. The holidays portend to be quieter and “new normal” seems likely to be the watchwords for 2021.

So the “temporary” measures that were put in place — such as the ban of utility shutoffs — must be re-evaluated through this now clearer lens: The collateral damage of the pandemic in economic terms will unfold for months or years to come. Temporary layoffs have become permanent. Supposed stopgap furloughs remain in place. Commercial real estate is abundant, the travel industry is in the tank and the wheel of economic uncertainty goes round and round, where — when — she’ll stop, nobody knows.

In the meantime, citizens must do the responsible thing and manage within their means. Spending adjustments, if needed, should be made. This is reasonable. Nonetheless, the reasonable thing may not be possible, at least not immediately, for some. Spending adjustments in the midst of this pandemic could mean “adjusting” to a hungry belly or a cold nose. That’s why the PUC’s creation of the protected class is both compassionate and sensible. Yet even that reprieve will have to come to an end at some point. It was time for a reckoning with “temporary.” The PUC was wise to see this. — ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editorial**

It’s hard to ignore Pennsylvania’s hike in new COVID-19 cases; hard not to wonder, if the hike continues to a serious “second wave,” what that means for Election Day.

Will those planning to vote in person change their plans and vote by mail? What of President Trump’s supporters, urged for months to vote *only* in person? Might health concerns outweigh politics? Could mail-in voting, until now widely preferred by Democrats over Republicans, suddenly becomes bipartisan? But wouldn’t that further flood county offices, create more chances for challenged ballots and extend the delay in confirming election results? Like almost everything else this year, who knows?

What’s known is nearly half the state’s 67 counties, including Dauphin, Lebanon, Berks, Franklin and Huntingdon, show rises in new coronavirus cases, according to [tracking by Spotlight PA](#). And on Wednesday, state Health Secretary Rachel Levine said the state is “at the start of a fall resurgence.” The spikes are chalked up partly to increased testing and college outbreaks, even though 42 percent of cases are in people 50 and older, the most reliable voters by age. Levine noted cases are rising among adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Many states have COVID-19 spikes worse than Pennsylvania’s, but few states are as critical in determining who wins the White House.

So, if outbreaks worsen here, whose voters are most likely affected? Perhaps Trump voters who don’t trust mail-in end up staying home, reducing the president’s odds of a comeback in a state where polling shows Joe Biden in the lead. Then again, most Trump voters, [if Trump rallies are a guide](#), don’t seem concerned about catching the disease. In contrast, Democrats view COVID-19 as a far greater health threat than Republicans do. According to [Pew Research](#), 85% to 46%. Maybe Democrats stay home.

Then again, Democrats vote by mail more than Republicans. In Pennsylvania, [D’s requested nearly three-times more mail-in ballots than R’s](#); and are returning ballots at five times the rate of R’s, according to the Associated Press. Maybe older voters, key blocs for both parties, planning to vote in person, get scared off going to the polls *after* the October 27 deadline to request mail-in ballots? And what about mixed messages about how to vote?

Trump sometimes pushes mail-in voting; some Democrats push in-person voting. Last month, via Twitter, [Trump told Florida supporters to get a mail-in ballot](#): “Fill it out and send it in. Request yours today.” Meanwhile, [Philadelphia Democrats](#) now promote in-person voting. And the [Collective PAC](#), a group

working to elect Black lawmakers, told The New York Times it's spending big in big cities, including Philadelphia, to encourage voting in person; an effort to reduce expected legal challenges to mail-ins.

Lots of factors in play here. Yet, since the nation has never voted for president in a time and atmosphere quite like this, there's no real data to go on. Still, Elaine Kamarck, a Brookings Institution Senior Fellow and Harvard Kennedy School public policy lecturer, headed [a state-by-state study](#) of voting in a pandemic. She believes most states, including Pennsylvania, should be fine. "We're a lot better off than in the primary season because there's been a lot of learning, and states are adopting safety measures for in-person voting. "And most people get it because we've been shopping in grocery stores for seven months. We know the drill with masks, distancing, plexiglass," she says.

Also, many states, including ours, expanded or added mail-in voting, which the Brookings study calls "the safest and most secure way to vote in a pandemic." (For context, 33 million mail-in votes were cast in 2016, about 25 percent of the total vote. This year, up to 80 million mail-ins are expected. And voting by mail, because of COVID-19, is more accessible in most states.) The Brookings study, updated this month, grades each state's voting preparedness: Pennsylvania is one of 17 getting a "B;" 8 states got an "A;" 18 got a "C;" 6 got "D's;" 1, Alabama, got an "F." All in all, not bad.

But Kamarck says a downside for states is they're spending more to run elections than ever before. That could mean cutbacks at polling places, causing long lines, delays and, because of so many mail-in votes, piles of provisional ballots. "There will be lots of natural human error," she says, "mistakes will be made. And if this is a close election, this will be a mess. If it's not close, it won't matter." The same could be said for the state's COVID-19 spikes. If they presage a fast-breaking "second wave," this election will be a mess. If they don't, then at least in terms of Election 2020, they likely won't much matter. – **John Baer's column in *Harrisburg Patriot-News***

