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The Appalachian Regional Commission has awarded \$8 million in grants to Pennsylvania counties hit hard by a decline in the coal mining region, according to a statement from the office of Gov. Tom Wolf.

"As the economies of coal communities declined, less funding was available to complete the infrastructure projects needed to attract new businesses," said Sheri Collins, acting executive director of the Governor's Office of Broadband Initiatives. "This includes high-speed, reliable broadband internet access. The projects funded by this round of ARC grants will help coal communities establish the level of broadband access required to compete in today's economy, removing a major obstacle to starting or relocating a business in this region."

Nationally, employment in the coal mining industry is down sharply over the course of the past 30 years, from 136,000 people in 1989 to 53,000 in September 2019, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Founded in 1965, the Appalachian Regional Commission is a federal entity founded to spur economic development in the 12 states that make up the Appalachian region, which includes much of Pennsylvania. Funding for the commission to distribute to the various states is provided by a Congressional appropriation.

The 10 projects include:

- A \$2.5 million grant was awarded to Tioga County improve broadband services there. Tri-County Rural Electric Cooperative, which is providing \$3.2 million, will work with county officials to construct 175 miles of fiber in Tioga, Potter and Lycoming counties. The project will benefit about 60 businesses and 581 residences. The number of coal mines in the area decreased 66 percent from 2007 to 2017 and employment by mines dropped 42 percent.
- The Venango County Economic Development Authority will receive \$1.5 million for a new business innovation center. The grant will also expand a fiber optic network that will be used by the innovation center's business district. The center is expected to connect 29 new businesses to the fiber optic network and develop 20 new businesses. Private investment will add \$1.2 million to the project.
- Sixty-five new businesses and 200 new jobs are expected to be created through a \$1.22 million grant to Bridgeway Capital that will create the Western Pennsylvania Entrepreneur Diversification Fund. The grant and \$5.6 million from private investments will fund counseling, business development workshops, a regional business incubator and provide grants to entrepreneurs.
- An estimated 46 businesses and 60 workers in seven North Central Pennsylvania counties are expected to benefit from a \$725,850 grant to Clearfield County. The money will be used for the North Central PA Launchbox and Innovation Collaborative. A makerspace and training center will be developed while manufacturers can receive research and development services.
- The city of Erie will receive \$500,000 to fund free public Wi-Fi in the city as well as other services including license plate recognition and streetlights that are remotely controlled. Erie officials are hoping to

become a Smart City by 2028 and are receiving an additional \$900,000 investment from other sources.

- The Greene County Board of Commissioners will receive \$50,000 for the Rural Broadband Coverage and Feasibility Study.
- The Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission will receive \$50,000 for a feasibility study that will look at ways to expand broadband and cellular services to eight counties in South-Central Pennsylvania.
- Fifty-thousand dollars will go to tecBridge LLC in Scranton, which is assessing the business incubation climate in Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Schuylkill and Wayne counties.
- The Fay-Penn Economic Development Council will receive \$20,000 for a feasibility study on the construction of a multi-tenant speculative shell building in Fayette County.
- The Southwestern Pennsylvania Coalition in Pittsburgh will receive \$1.42 million for a project to develop regional centers that will provide technical assistance to manufacturers in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio. About 400 new jobs and 50 new businesses are expected as a result of the project and 600 jobs are expected to be retained. –

The Center Square

