

"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

~ Harry S. Truman



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December 21, 2020

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The recent award of \$368 million in federal aid to broadband developers is part of an overall solution for expanding high-speed internet access to unserved and underserved areas of rural and urban Pennsylvania.

The auction by the Federal Communications Commission will split the aid among 13 successful bidders who plan to extend broadband cable to reach 327,000 state residents in specific service areas during the next 10 years. This represents about one-third of the nearly one million Pennsylvanians who lack access to reliable high-speed broadband.

The FCC's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund targets rural areas that lack broadband because it's costly to deploy cable lines due to low population density and difficult terrain. State officials emphasize the cooperative effort that led to Pennsylvania emerging as the sixth highest aid recipient in the national FCC auction. This auction allocates \$9.2 billion to a total of 180 bidders across the nation. The FCC aid will flow as state officials and lawmakers continue to look for ways to accelerate the deployment of broadband cable by a quicker timetable than 10 years.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major catalyst for this. Many officials note the need for bridging the digital gap to help students learn remotely at home, patients to get care through telemedicine and businesses to boost online sales. A recent study by the Joint State Government Commission said the pandemic has put regions without broadband access at a disadvantage in health care, education, agriculture and economic development.

Virtually all of the successful auction bidders will deploy broadband with download speeds of 100 megabits-per-second, according to the FCC. This is four times faster than the "Netflix speed" benchmark of 25 megabits-per-second currently used by the FCC to define access to broadband. Developers must meet periodic build-out requirements to reach all assigned locations by the end of the sixth year.

In Pennsylvania, Bradford, Bedford and Susquehanna counties will receive the largest broadband investments (respectively at \$22.9 million, \$21.3 million and \$18.8 million) from this auction and see more than 6,000 homes and businesses being served. But projects will be spread across 66 counties with only Northampton County not included.

The state Public Utility Commission urged developers to participate in the auction and helped form a coalition to back the effort. "The success of PA's bids were dependent on the businesses and organizations that stepped up and participated in the auction," said PUC spokesman Nils Hagen-Frederiksen. "If there were no PA bidders, there would be no PA projects. There's been a lot of behind the scenes work over the past year to answer questions from potential bidders and keep as many entities as possible involved in the process."

It's a way for Pennsylvania to get a return on federal money from Washington, he added. "Pennsylvania telecommunications consumers and businesses pay into the federal fund to support this program, so it is important to see those dollars flow back to PA projects," said Mr. Hagen-Frederiksen. A key tool used by the coalition is an interactive map developed by Pennsylvania State University's Rural Extension Service.

The map is designed to help developers estimate their project costs and the infrastructure needed, Penn State said. The map breaks the state down into census blocks that display the names of broadband service providers and the level of service provided. The map provides measuring tools to help developers make estimates, check eligible sites for service and information on existing structures, transmission lines, substations and tower data.

Pennsylvania created a new broadband grant program last month using \$5 million realized through the repeal of a state tax credit. The enabling law allows the program to draw on additional state and federal funds. The commission study identifies a number of other potential broadband funding avenues,

including several traditional state economic development programs, levying a severance tax on natural gas production, a service charge on cell phones, a broadband tax on ISPs, leasing state buildings to support broadband services and using local share gaming revenue. – **Capitolwire**

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Zoom is lifting its 40-minute cap on free meetings for users during certain days this holiday season, the company announced this week. Zoom is allowing users unlimited meeting times during days spanning the end of Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, and the last days of Kwanzaa, as a "token of appreciation to our users during an extraordinary time," the company [said in a blog post](#).

The dates and times for the unlimited meetings are: 10 a.m. on Dec. 17 to 6 a.m. on Dec. 19, 10 a.m. on Dec. 23 to 6 a.m. on Dec. 26, and 10 a.m. on Dec. 30 to 6 a.m. on Jan. 2. The time limit will be automatically lifted during the designated times, and users will not need to do anything to remove the limit, Zoom said.

The company made a similar decision in November, lifting the time limit for meetings on Thanksgiving. Typically, meetings with multiple users are capped at 40 minutes for users using free Zoom plans. Zoom has seen a boom in popularity this year amid the coronavirus pandemic, as school and work shifted online. Users also flocked to the site to gather for personal use as public health officials put in place social distancing guidance and requirements to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has urged Americans not to travel for Christmas to mitigate the spread of the potentially fatal virus that has infected more than 17 million people in the U.S. – **The Hill**

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A new NHL season is on the way. On Sunday, [the league announced](#) it will play a 56-game regular season starting Jan. 13, 2021. The Stanley Cup Playoffs are slated to begin May 8 and last into July. The league and NHLPA have come to an agreement on key dates and framework for the 2021 season, including scheduling, temporary realignment and COVID-19 protocols, among the scheduling highlights is that teams will only play other clubs in their division during the regular season.

The [NHL](#) created a Canadian division as part of its realignment, called the North division, along with the West, Central and East divisions this season.

North : Calgary Flames; Edmonton Oilers; Montreal Canadiens; Ottawa Senators; Toronto Maple Leafs; Vancouver Canucks; Winnipeg Jets  
East : Boston Bruins; Buffalo Sabres; New Jersey Devils; New York Islanders; New York Rangers; [Philadelphia Flyers](#); [Pittsburgh Penguins](#); Washington Capitals  
Central : Carolina Hurricanes; Chicago Blackhawks; Columbus Blue Jackets; Dallas Stars; Detroit Red Wings; Florida Panthers; Nashville Predators; Tampa Bay Lightning  
West : Anaheim Ducks; Arizona Coyotes; Colorado Avalanche; Los Angeles Kings; Minnesota Wild; San Jose Sharks; St. Louis Blues; Vegas Golden Knights

The news comes following a lengthy negotiation process in which the NHL and NHLPA found themselves at a stalemate over financial issues. After initially targeting a Dec. 1 start date, the league and players' association pushed back the proposed dates as they continued to battle over concessions.

The two sides reached an agreement on a financial arrangement in July but -- much like the situation we saw play out with [MLB](#) earlier this year -- owners informed the players that they were seeking additional concessions because of the state of the pandemic. The players held their ground and, this week, the two sides moved forward with the initial financial agreement. Following a four-month shutdown due to COVID-19, the NHL successfully completed last

season with an expanded Stanley Cup Playoffs played within two bubble cities (Toronto and Edmonton). Over the course of the NHL's return to play, the league conducted 33,174 COVID-19 tests in those two hub cities and had zero positive cases. – **CBS Sports**



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