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KentuckyWired was supposed to be a can't-miss project, a high-tech solution that would help revive the floundering Appalachian economy.

Taxpayers would join private companies to pay for 3,400 miles of fiber-optic cables, transforming Loretta Lynn's "Butcher Holler" into what Republican U.S. Rep. Hal Rogers called "Silicon Holler" But a key portion of how Kentucky was to pay for the deal has fallen apart, leading Gov. Matt Bevin's administration to fret publicly Thursday that the deal could put taxpayers at risk for paying back a \$289 million loan issued last year to build the project.



Finance Secretary William Landrum said the Bevin administration supports the project. But Landrum said state officials do not know how they will pay for their part of the deal, bringing uncertainty to an effort that government officials from both parties had boasted was the answer for a world in which coal no longer keeps the economy

humming. "I need to think this through. I didn't understand all of this," said Scott Brinkman, Bevin's secretary of the Executive Cabinet and chairman of the state authority that was supposed to provide service on the network. "That's a lot of money."

Mike Lee, director of the KentuckyWired Operations Co., which is responsible for building and maintaining the network, said the private companies — not taxpayers — would be liable for paying back the loan. A group of companies borrowed the money last year to begin building the high speed Internet network throughout the state. At first, the network would serve state government, including state agencies, public libraries and public colleges and universities. Kentucky would pay about \$28 million a year for the Internet service, of which about \$13 million would come from the state's 173 public school districts. The private companies would use the payments to pay back the money they had borrowed to build the network.

Eventually, once the full network was complete, the state would lease it to private companies to provide service in some of the state's underserved areas. That would give places like the eastern Kentucky mountains access to the type of sophisticated network that would allow technology companies to locate there and hire people. But it appears the state can't use the money from public school districts to pay for the project. The Kentucky Department of Education participates in a federal program that pays for most of

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review
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its Internet service. To keep that money, and switch its Internet service to KentuckyWired, the contract for the districts' Internet service must go through a competitive bidding process overseen by the Kentucky Finance and Administration Cabinet.

Steve Rucker, the former deputy secretary of the Cabinet, worked on writing that contract. He then left his job to become the executive director of the Kentucky Communications Network Authority, the public entity state officials planned to use to provide the Internet service. Rucker then bid on the contract he helped write.

AT&T, which provides Internet services to Kentucky public schools, filed a formal protest. That prompted former Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear to pull the contract. He then left office in December. New Republican Gov. Matt Bevin has not re-issued that contract because he is concerned about losing the federal money, or about \$11 million a year. "Gov. Bevin is committed to promoting high speed broadband access throughout Kentucky," Bevin spokeswoman Jessica Ditto said. "Significant questions have been raised about whether state procurements related to the project were fair to all parties involved, and it's our responsibility to the taxpayers that we take the necessary time to understand the implications of the information revealed today."

Brinkman announced Rucker's resignation during the authority's board meeting Thursday, citing "a very, very serious health issue." But Landrum, the finance secretary, said that does not fix the problems with the contract. "Right now, we have to determine an outside source other than (the authority,)" Landrum said.

It will be difficult for state officials to find the money. Bevin just proposed his two-year state spending plan, where he announced more than \$650 million in budget cuts in order to deal with the multibillion shortfalls in the state's public pension plans. Landrum said he remains committed to the project, even without knowing how the state will pay for it. "My intent is simply to take care of the taxpayers of Kentucky, simply to ensure that the taxpayers' wallets are not put at risk," he said. – **Associated Press**

Federal regulators on Thursday voted to give the public easier access to data about advertising spending by presidential candidates and other political campaigns, requiring pay-TV providers and radio stations to post the information on an Internet database.

The 5-0 vote by the Federal Communications Commission expands a requirement that was placed on TV broadcasters in 2012 to make their so-called public files available on a central agency database instead of forcing people to physically view paper files at stations. The expanded rules are expected to go into effect in time for the heavy political ad spending leading up to the November presidential and congressional elections.

"These days, it doesn't make sense for hard copies of the documents to gather dust in forlorn file cabinets," said FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai, a Republican. Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, a Democrat, said the agency's rules were outdated and left the public data "locked in the information practices of the past." "This kind of requirement may have made sense in the 'Mad Men' era, but it makes no sense in the digital age," she said of the old rules on public access.

Broadcast TV carries the most political advertising, the FCC said. But ad spending on pay TV and other media is growing so there was a need to expand the online access requirement. The new rules apply to most cable and satellite TV providers, as well as broadcast and satellite radio. "This is a huge step toward making political advertising more transparent," said John Wonderlich, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation, a public interest group that advocates more access to government information and the flow of political money. "Political ad spending is already moving at a breakneck pace and the public deserves to know how much is being spent to influence our elections on the airwaves," he said.

Wonderlich urged the FCC to focus next on making the data more usable by requiring a standardized format to allow easier search and analysis. The public files contain data about the purchases of political advertising, as well information on programming, station ownership and other details. The rules are expected to take effect in three to six months, after publication in the Federal Registers and a review by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Cable systems with fewer than 1,000 subscribers are exempted from the new rules because they have few requirements for their public files and do not have to provide political ad spending data. Cable systems with 1,000 to 5,000 subscribers will have two years to comply. – **Los Angeles Times**

Comcast Ventures, the venture capital arm of the cable giant, has invested in Wilmington's College Ave Student Loans. The College Ave Student Loans start-up operates an online marketplace to connect college students with loans for college.

Comcast Ventures, part of Comcast Corp., was the largest investor in a \$20-million financing round that includes Fenway Summer Ventures, DW Partners and former Sallie Mae CEO Albert L. Lord. College Ave Student Loans launched in 2014 and originated its first college loan in January 2015.

Comcast Ventures managing director David Zilberman said that the firm would loan "hundreds of millions of dollars" to college students and grow rapidly. Comcast Ventures would be looking at startup firms in financial services as investment targets. "There's a lot of innovation happening in the financial industry," he said. College Ave had a "millennial-oriented" business model to engage young adults and use advanced analytics to evaluate loan applications. The company employs 24 people in Wilmington. – **Philadelphia Inquirer**

Pennsylvania is joining a multi-state effort to improve the accuracy of the state's voter registration database. The Department of State said Thursday that the Electronic Registration Information Center, or ERIC, uses sophisticated technology to compare data from the more than a dozen participating states against data from the U.S. Postal Service the Social Security Administration. The nonprofit corporation receives voter registration data and some motor-vehicle records from the states every 60 days.

Marian Schneider, deputy secretary of elections and administration, says Pennsylvania officials worked with stakeholders and other states before concluding that this is the best option. The Washington-based center was founded in 2012 with financial help from the Pew Charitable Trusts. It is owned, governed and managed by state elections officials. – **Associated Press**



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