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A proposal by the Federal Communications Commission to provide \$20 billion for rural broadband could help almost 200,000 homes and businesses in Pennsylvania, according to federal data.

The Federal Communications Commission voted Thursday to approve a \$20.4 billion plan to subsidize the construction of high-speed broadband networks in rural America. FCC Chairman Ajit Pai called the vote the "biggest step the FCC has ever taken to close the rural digital divide," according to RouteFifty, a website tracking government use of technology. The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund will help internet service providers deploy broadband over 10 years to areas currently lacking service of at least 25 megabits per second download and 3 Mbps upload speeds. The federal agency estimates about six million rural homes and businesses are located in areas that could benefit from the initiative. Internet service providers, including telecoms and government utilities, would bid to provide broadband and voice services to the locations.

Pennsylvania is one of 25 states where the broadband initiative is expected to benefit more than 100,000 locations. The FCC estimates that 197,000 homes and businesses in Pennsylvania could be helped by rural broadband spending. Casey Smith, a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, said state officials have not decided how the state will respond to the FCC funding announcement. "The Administration is currently reviewing the plan, after which it will determine whether to seek funding directly or to support Pennsylvania providers as they seek to secure funding from the FCC," Smith said. The Wolf Administration has been working to draw attention to the need to tackle the rural broadband access gap, she said. "It's staggering to think that in the 21st century our school students cannot connect to the internet from home so they have to be driven back to the school parking lot to do their homework in the family car," Smith said.

Gov. Tom Wolf has made improving broadband access one of the priorities he'd like to tackle with funding from the Restore PA plan, which would tax the natural gas industry. "Addressing the rural broadband gap is both costly and time-consuming. While Pennsylvania has made some strides over the past few years, there remains a great deal of work to ensure that all Pennsylvanians have access to high-speed internet," Smith said. "We've said it before and we'll continue to say it: high-speed internet should be made readily available and looked at no differently than we do water, sewer, and electricity."

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Only Alabama, Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin are poised to see more locations served by the proposed broadband expansion, according to FCC data. California, with 421,000 potential locations, and Texas, with 381,000, stand to benefit the most from the broadband push, according to FCC data.

But in Pennsylvania, those who've been focusing on the rural broadband issue, feel like the federal data hasn't accurately conveyed how much of the state needs better broadband service, said state Sen. Gene Yaw, R-Lycoming County. He is chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, which commissioned a Penn State study released last summer that concluded that there were spots in every one of the state's 67 counties that had internet speeds too slow to be considered broadband. "I have serious questions" about how the FCC determines where broadband is available, Yaw said. "I think we're going to get short-changed."

It was a concern also raised by Democrats on the Federal Communications Commission. They declined to fully support the broadband expansion out of concern that the federal government hasn't done enough to determine exactly where the help is needed most, according to Route Fifty. Steve Samara, president of the Pennsylvania Telephone Association, said that Pennsylvania has been "ahead of the game" in some ways on rural broadband. Pennsylvania enacted legislation in 2004 requiring broadband deployment across the state, he said. Telephone companies in Pennsylvania will certainly be looking into the new broadband funding to determine if it makes sense to try to tap into it, Samara said. The first phase of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund will begin later this year. It will target census blocks that are wholly unserved with fixed broadband. This phase would make available up to \$16 billion to census blocks where existing data shows there is no such service available whatsoever. Phase II of the program will make available at least \$4.4 billion to target partially served areas. — *cnhi.com*

At least one U.S. phone company likely broke the law by sharing data that can pinpoint the location of smartphone users, the Federal Communications Commission said Friday. FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said in a letter to Congress that one or more wireless companies apparently violated federal law and could be subject to penalties. He didn't name any companies but said the commission would decide soon on enforcement actions, now that the agency has completed an investigation.

The FCC's enforcement bureau began investigating following 2018 reports that U.S. wireless providers were selling real-time phone location information to outside data aggregation firms without phone users' knowledge or consent. Location-tracking services can use the data to keep tabs on packages and vehicles or create personalized marketing pitches, but it can also be used by bounty hunters or stalkers to identify the whereabouts of nearly any phone in the U.S. within seconds. The reports led the four major companies, Verizon, AT&T, Sprint and T-Mobile, **to pledge to stop** providing users' location information to data brokers, stepping back from a business practice that had drawn criticism for endangering privacy.

A statement Friday by FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel said the safety and privacy of millions of Americans was at risk and "it's a shame that it took so long for the FCC to reach a conclusion that was so obvious." Rosenworcel is a Democrat; Republicans have a 3-2 majority at the agency. "For just a few hundred dollars, shady middlemen could sell your location within a few hundred meters based on your wireless phone data," she said. "It's chilling to consider what a black market could do with this data." Democrats in Congress clashed with Pai on this issue last year, expressing concern in a November letter to the FCC that it was shirking its duty to protect consumer privacy. Pai, a Republican, responded in December that the commission was taking its investigation seriously and said he recognized the importance of the issue to domestic violence victims, victims of sex trafficking and others. — *Associated Press*



**Broadband
Cable Association
of Pennsylvania**

127 State Street Harrisburg, PA 17101
717-214-2000 (F) 717-214-2020
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