



## CABLE ACADEMY 2019 • MAY 1 & 2 KALAHARI POCONOS RESORT

Panels & presentations featuring:



Bruce Leichtman  
President  
Leichtman Research



Jeff Ross  
President  
Armstrong Utilities



Jennifer Koester  
Dir., Global Partnerships  
Google



Rich Shea  
President & CEO  
Atlantic Broadband



Matt Polka  
President & CEO  
American Cable Assoc.



Mark Walter  
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Armstrong is using government grants and its own funds to expand internet service in southern, eastern Erie County. Thirty years after the creation of the world wide web, a majority of Erie County residents who live south of Interstate 90 still don't have access to fixed, high-speed internet service. They struggle with digital subscriber line plans that aren't fast enough to stream more than one video at a time, or satellite internet plans that are often expensive, suffer from delays and are prone to weather-related outages. "You get outside of places like Union City, Corry and Albion, there is little to no coverage," said Erick Friedman, Erie County's director of information technology. "Even the area just northwest of Edinboro is a problem."

This internet divide will soon close for thousands of rural residents when Butler-based Armstrong Broadband provides high-speed internet to areas of southern and eastern Erie County. Installation began in the fall and is expected to be completed this spring. Internet providers have been reluctant to extend coverage to rural areas because it has not been cost-efficient, but Armstrong received federal and state funding to expand its services in Erie, Crawford and Mercer counties.

Armstrong received \$2.6 million from the federal Connect America Fund and another \$1.2 million from Pennsylvania's Broadband Investment Incentive Program. Armstrong is investing as much as

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three times that amount of its own money in the process, said Shawn Beqaj, Armstrong's vice president of regulatory policy and interconnection. "We look at the cost of installing and maintaining our lines in areas with only four or five homes per mile," Beqaj said. "Typically the long-term return in areas like that make it unprofitable to operate lines in these areas. But these (funding) programs allow us to extend our services to areas with only five homes per mile."

In return for the funding, Armstrong promised to provide internet service of up to 100 megabits per second to the affected areas by the spring of 2022.

Customers who live in the affected areas will be able to purchase internet service at the same price as other Armstrong customers, Beqaj said. Armstrong charges about \$50 a month for 50 Mbps of service and around \$65 a month for 100 Mbps. "Only 25 percent to 30 percent of Erie County residents who live south of I-90 have access to a fixed internet source that provides at least 25 Mbps, so this will help," Friedman said.

In an effort to find out exactly which Erie County residents don't have access to high-speed internet, the county is preparing a short survey. The survey is expected to be released later this month and will be available on the county's website. "Anyone in the county can take the survey but we're really interested in people who have slow broadband internet or none at all," Friedman said. "We want to know where they live and the type of internet they use." Friedman said he hopes to include the survey in local newspapers so that people without internet access can participate. – *Erie Times News*

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Rural Pennsylvanians for years have vividly detailed the inconvenience and deprivation of living without high-speed internet service.

A family who lived outside of Waterford in 2015 related to reporter Jim Martin that the technological gymnastics they had to perform, using a 4G cellphone connection device and separate smartphone data plans, to access broadband internet service at their home. When it came time to pay bills online, family members even went so far as to seek out free WiFi hotspots to fire up their laptops and make payments, so as not to squander precious monthly data.

The Sharon Herald in December detailed a memo that state Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill, of York County, submitted to her fellow lawmakers. She said cars could be seen idling outside rural schools in the morning while students used computers and the schools' Wi-Fi services to complete online assignments because they had no high-speed internet at home.

In this digitally connected global marketplace and community, the lack of high-speed internet imposes a crippling disadvantage on wide swaths of Pennsylvania. Businesses, health care and educational institutions all need that technology to thrive. Federal government tallies place the number of Pennsylvanians without high-speed internet at 800,000. But a recent Penn State study puts the number at nearly 11 million people.

Demand is supposed to drive supply. But for years, telecommunications companies have balked at making the costly investments to bring broadband to rural areas because those

investments simply would not pay off. Both the state and federal governments rightly intervened, offering incentives to speed this transformation. Now with that public support, three companies have begun to connect rural Pennsylvanians, including those in Erie County, with high-speed internet.

As reporter David Bruce detailed, one of the companies, Butler-based Armstrong Broadband, has received \$2.6 million from the Federal Communications Commission's Connect America Fund and \$1.2 million from Gov. Tom Wolf's Broadband Investment Incentive Program to expand rural broadband in southern and eastern Erie County and also parts of Crawford and Mercer counties. Installation began last fall and is expected to conclude this spring.

Armstrong is making hefty and welcome investments of its own money, but a spokesman acknowledged that only the government funding programs made the company's expansion possible. Its commitment to this effort is welcome, especially since in 2017 Verizon disappointingly opted out of \$23.6 million a year the FCC had allotted the company to expand service to Pennsylvania homes and businesses.

Some rightly eye big government programs with suspicion. Waste and inefficiency can flow from government bureaucracy.

These broadband-expansion incentive programs, like rural electrification initiatives of decades past, represent an enlightened exercise of power and deployment of public resources to bridge unfair gaps, improve lives and bolster prosperity. They should prove transformational. — **Erie Times-News editorial**

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Krystal Roche, a senior at Jules Mastbaum High School at 3116 Frankford Ave., was looking for another way to prepare for her future outside of school. It wasn't until she heard about The Comcast Senior Only Program that she realized that this was the opportunity that she was looking for.

Established during the 2016-2017 school year, The Comcast Senior Only Program (COM-SYOP) is a paid co-op program designed for qualifying high school seniors enrolled in Electrical Construction, Computer Systems and Information Technology Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. "I knew that this program would open many doors for me," Krystal said. "Not everyone is fit for college or not everyone knows what they want to do after they graduate from high school. I knew that this program could help me a lot as far as deciding on whether I want to be a tech and keep my trade or if I want to continue my education."

"The program itself was extremely hard to get in, but it's definitely been worth it," she added. "This whole experience is different from being in the classroom. We actually go out and see what techs do on an everyday basis. One of the things I like doing in the program is installing the Wi-Fi boxes. I've gained so much knowledge from this experience."

Through the COM-SYOP program, students have an opportunity to learn the fundamentals of cabling and networking through real-world, hands-on experiences coupled with courses through Comcast University. The program takes place at one of the three Comcast centers including Parkside, Wayne Avenue, and Northeast

Philadelphia. Students enrolled in COM-SYOP accompany Comcast Technicians twice a month on actual service and installation appointments for residential customers. The program takes place every Friday and students report to their school the four remaining days each week.

Students who are successful in the program are guaranteed an interview with a hiring manager. Since the program's inception, four students have been offered full-time jobs. Three students have accepted the offer while one student relocated out of the area. "We interview students from the District that are involved with the CTE program," said Comcast tech operation manager in West Philadelphia Joseph Stanavich. "We select 12 students per calendar year to be involved during the school year. The training is based around cable TV, safety, conducting field ride-outs, and observing other front line employee locations while they're with us one day a week. The students are paid employees."

"On their first day with us, they will immediately go through safety training both in the field and in the office. They will learn how to protect themselves. They're given personal protective gear to use in the field. They're trained on how to use protective equipment. They will also learn anything from TV 101, general cable television theory to learning about our products.

"Each day may be devoted to a certain product line whether it be the internet, phones, business class products, or Wi-Fi," he added. "The training will go on for half of the year. They're next schedule day to come is a ride out day. Students will arrive at our office before meeting their tech mentor." Mentors are assigned to students to guide them through learning experiences, by teaching them technical skills, while reinforcing the customer service skills core to the Comcast brand. "My mentor Eva [JordanFair] has been extremely helpful since I've been in the program," Krystal said. "She's very open to helping me with whatever I need. She's also very generous and kind. All of our mentors have a lot of patience when it comes to us. Because we're new to this, we ask a lot of questions. Not only do they answer our questions, but they also support us and is very encouraging."

Stanavich said that the biggest thing he hopes the students take away from their experience in the COM-SYOP program is real job training and insight into the professional world. "Through this program, students are able to benefit from real-world job training," Stanavich said. "It not only gives them insight into the professional world, but the experience and mentoring provides them with exposure, new knowledge, skills, and a potential job opportunity upon graduation. I really feel fortunate to be a part of a program like this and be able to help students accomplish their dreams." — **Philadelphia Tribune**



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