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Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed a bill Monday that would remove state regulators' authority to settle certain electric utility disputes. In February, Dayton indicated he could veto bills perceived as weakening the authority of the state Public Utilities Commission — a group appointed by the governor that regulates the state's electricity, gas and telephone companies.

"Eliminating the PUC's role would remove critical consumer protection for customers," Dayton said in a letter Monday to House Speaker Kurt Daudt, R-Crown. The Senate passed the bill 39-26 on Thursday after an 89-37 House vote in February. Rep. Dave Baker, R-Willmar, the bill's chief author, did not have a comment.

Rep. Pat Garofalo, R-Farmington, a co-author of the bill, was "disappointed." "The rural communities had done everything right to achieve a bipartisan consensus on the issue," Garofalo said Monday night. In a Twitter post, Garofalo said, "We will keep trying."

The next step, Garofalo said in a phone interview, is to "include this in our appropriations bills." A common complaint handled by the PUC concerns additional fees some co-op customers are charged after installing solar panels or wind generators. These customers say the grid connection fees — ranging from $7 to $83 — were a disincentive to install sources of renewable energy. The co-ops say the fees are needed to cover their fixed costs.

The legislation would have sent these disputes to a third-party mediator, not the PUC. But "it does not provide any guidance on how this mediation would work," Dayton said in his letter. Customers elect their electric co-ops' boards of directors. Since co-ops are accountable directly to customers, they don't need to be "second-guessed" by the PUC, Jim Horan, an attorney for the Minnesota Rural Electric Association, told the Senate energy committee.

Republicans want the PUC to be restored to "its original roots," where "co-ops make their own decisions," Garofalo said Monday. However, opponents of the bill have argued that co-op customers have nowhere to go if they're at odds with their local utility.

In his letter to Daudt, Dayton gave an anecdote about a farmer having an independent review completed by the PUC when an informal process with his co-op did not resolve a dispute over a fee charged on his farm's wind turbine. The fee was later removed from the farmer's bill because of the independent review, Dayton said. "All Minnesota customers — from family farmers to large businesses — should be able to invest in technology to produce clean and efficient energy with the assurance that the PUC is available to provide consumer protection," the governor said. – *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

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It's about 15 miles from here (Halcott, NY) to a dairy testing facility in Roxbury, or about one hour and 20 minutes round trip if you know these dusty mountain back roads like Chris DiBenedetto, a dairy farmer. He has been going back and forth for years, ferrying a sample of fresh milk for a federally mandated drug test before he can start processing each batch. But what stressed him the most were the valuable daylight farming hours lost to the journey, while he was stuck in his car or waiting for the results.

Now, Mr. DiBenedetto gives a sample to a driver heading that way to do the drop-off, letting the new fiber wiring hanging over his old route do the simple document delivery for him via email. The dairy farmer in this speck of a town about 140 miles north of New York City was one of the first beneficiaries of an ambitious initiative to extend broadband to every household in the state by 2018 — no matter how rural or far-flung the address — which would make New York the first state to reach that high-speed internet milestone.

For years, this town was like many isolated spots in New York and across the country, left sitting on the shoulders of the digital highway unable to access the broadband speeds that so many businesses and households count on. But now under a state-led program, towns like Halcott, with fewer than 300 residents, are getting wired, giving residents faster access to the internet and opening new opportunities for businesses.

Two Stones Farm, a small goat farm here, has created an online store to offer more products, including artisanal cheese. "I look at it this way: It's very much like electricity was at one time," said Alan White, 54, who owns Two Stones Farm with his wife. "Electricity would have never come to our valley if it was based strictly on population. It's not a luxury. It's a necessity that we need to operate."

For those used to having broadband at their disposal, it is hard to imagine not being able to Skype for a job interview, send messages on LinkedIn or Facebook, download an eTextbook, upload a homework project or binge-watch on Netflix. But about 12.6 million American households lack access to broadband, according to a study last year by the Federal Communications Commission, which has **classified broadband as a type of utility,** similar to telephones.

The problem is worse in poorer and rural areas: At least 30 percent of people in Mississippi and Arkansas do not have access to broadband, and sparsely populated states like Montana have similar access rates. While President Trump's pledge to rebuild the nation's infrastructure has focused largely on roads, bridges and airports, the need to expand the broadband network is just as dire. The United States ranks 15th in broadband connectivity, behind countries such as South Korea and Canada, according **to a 2011 study from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development**.

The challenge in the United States is that it has vast tracts of sparsely populated regions where the cost of laying new fiber and cable wiring for broadband significantly outweighs the profits — 39 percent of Americans living in rural areas lack broadband access, compared with 4 percent of those living in cities, according to the F.C.C.

Under Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's "Broadband for All" initiative, New York's program is one of the most aggressive broadband expansions in the country, and is designed to help stem any losses a private company incurs through what is known as a reverse auction process.

Using data from the Federal Communications Commission to identify both unserved and underserved areas, the program divides the state into census blocks. The state then auctions off grant money for each census block, awarding the financing to the private company that seeks the lowest state subsidy. The system has attracted different providers, including major telecommunication companies like Fairpoint and Frontier, as well as smaller utilities like Middleburgh Telephone Company, known as Midtel, and Margaretville Telephone Company.

Along the two-lane roads winding through Delaware County in the Catskills, Midtel trucks are following a path similar to one they took years ago, threading fiber optic cables for broadband across the valley. "All the served, underserved and unserved areas don't end up in a nice row," said Jim Becker, the president of the company, which has existed for more than a century and is still overseen by his 94-year-old grandmother, Marge Becker. "Sometimes you have to build through somewhat of a served area to get to an unserved, and vice versa."

Turning on broadband can transform lives in rural places. Here in Halcott, a hamlet in the Catskills, the broadband has allowed Mr. DiBenedetto to broaden his business online — a yogurt company in Brooklyn recently contacted him about a single source contract. His daughter, Elena, was able to help out on the farm while getting a master's degree online.

"In today's technology-driven world, access to high-speed internet is essential to building strong communities, growing the economy and supporting our everyday lives," Governor Cuomo said. "New York is leading the nation with the largest state broadband investment program in history — ensuring high-speed internet access for all residents, especially those in rural areas, and empowering students, entrepreneurs and businesses to thrive in our global economy."

So far, the state's partnerships with private companies have worked relatively well and have enabled the program to make steady progress. But that has not always been the case when local governments have relied on private companies to upgrade internet networks. Though it was not a part of Mr. Cuomo's plan, Mayor Bill de Blasio **was forced to sue Verizon** this month after the company failed to build out its promised fiber-optic network to every home in New York City.

And while widening the broadband infrastructure is an essential step toward bridging the digital divide, simply ensuring access does not address the issue of affordability, especially since the F.C.C. is considering **slashing parts** of a federal program, known as Lifeline, that is meant to help provide affordable broadband to low-income residents.

Under New York's program, providers must offer 100 mbps speed — fast enough to download a movie in high definition in 90 seconds — for $60 a month. "That's pretty amazing," said Gigi Sohn, a former senior adviser at the F.C.C., acknowledging that it was a reasonable price given that prices elsewhere could be much higher. "But if you're really poor, can you afford it? I don't know. If you are a poor rural person living in Appalachia, that's a big bite out of your budget."

But many rural businesses in New York have jumped at the chance for faster internet. About an hour from Halcott lies the Beaverkill Valley Inn, a historic hotel sitting on the banks of the Beaver Kill river, a world-famous fly-fishing spot in Lew Beach, N.Y. There's no cellphone service, so for years the inn and its guests shared a satellite internet connection. "We were competing with our guests' need and our own need to do business," said Kathy Bryant, one of the inn's managers. She noted that despite a sprawling property well suited for corporate retreats and meetings, the inn was unable to attract such business because of its limited internet.

After years of pleading with local officials and telecommunications providers for a broadband connection, the inn was connected to high-speed internet by the Margaretville Telephone Company last August. Today, flush with retreats, weddings and guests spending an extra day or so "working from home," the inn just had the most successful year in its 120-year history. "Now, we just reassure them that they can still unplug while they're up here," Ms. Bryant said with a laugh. – *New York Times*

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Comcast's fifth annual weeklong "watchathon" begins April 3, and this year there'll be new contenders for the attention of some Xfinity TV customers: *Stranger Things*, *The Crown*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and anything else they might want to check out on Netflix. Viewers with X1 could even binge-watch Drew Barrymore binge-eating in her Netflix zombie comedy *Santa Clarita Diet*.

In what looked like an if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em move for both companies, Philadelphia-based Comcast **recently added access to the subscription streaming service for its X1 customers**. Next month's promotion will open Netflix's library to X1 customers who don't already subscribe to the service from April 3-9 — with an opportunity, naturally, to add a Netflix subscription to their bills starting April 10.

Though only X1 customers who also get broadband access through Comcast will be able to access Netflix, all Xfinity TV customers will be able to watch shows and movies from more than 50 participating networks, including HBO, Showtime, and Starz, whether or not those channels are included in their subscriptions. – philly.com

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You may think that TechMan complains a lot about technology and you would be right. But we have tech companies broadcasting how good their products are, so we need people to see them from the user point of view. So now that I've justified being a grumpy old man, here are my latest complaints.

Verizon FIOS TV's on-demand service never was that great, but the new one rolled out late last year is infinitely worse. "Terrible" and "nightmare" are a few of the more polite descriptions on the Verizon website forums.

In the old system, you had to maneuver vertically through text lists to get what you wanted. In the new one, to select a show, you have to maneuver horizontally through movie posters of programs one at a time and vertically between the two rows. Then the same thing to go back. This process requires many more clicks and sometimes the name of the show is barely readable. Plus the whole site seems slower than before, perhaps because it is now so graphics-intensive. It is onerous. Hey, Verizon, a lot of us can read. We don't need pictures.

Perhaps worse, previous episodes and seasons of network shows, which up until a few months ago were free, are now $1.99 per program to watch. The fee seems to kick in three or four shows back from the latest show. So if you discovered a show late and wanted to go back and watch the 10 episodes of the first season, it would now cost $20.

Verizon claims this is not its fault. The company says contracts with the providers now require this and that may be true, because Comcast is the same. Past shows on Premium channels like HBO are still free but of course you are a subscriber who pays. Are the networks trying to drive viewers to their online apps to avoid cable company charges? Who knows? But as usual, the consumer takes it in the neck. – *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

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Luzerne County is moving forward with a better-connected 911 system, pending council approval. In order to receive certain state funds for a 911 upgrade, the county must be part of a regional project group. Luzerne, Susquehanna, Monroe, Carbon, Schuylkill, Lackawanna, Pike and Wayne counties have been working together to plan a shared 911 system, but today's vote could formalize the agreement, said 911 director Fred Rosencrans.

The county could receive a grant of about $1.3 million from the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. By joining the project, Luzerne County will be connected to upgraded 911 equipment, provide text-to-911 service and have multiple connections to other counties' 911 centers, according to an agenda submittal. – *Hazleton Standard-Speaker*

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