



April 15, 2020

**Charter news
release**

The Federal Communications Commission has awarded a \$2.64 million grant to Armstrong Telecommunications so that it can provide high-

Charter Announces That It will Hold a Virtual Stockholder Meeting

New York Times Ready for Another Streaming Service? NBC's Peacock Starts Rollout

Erie Times-News Erie moves forward with plan for free public Wi-Fi

Bloomberg Frontier Communications to Prepare Bankruptcy Ahead of April 15 Payment

Motherboard How Google Plans to Push Its Coronavirus Tracing Feature to Android Phones

New York Times 'We Can Do Better': One Plan to Erase America's Digital Divide

Pennlive Pa. House sends its plan for reactivating the state's economy to Senate for consideration

Pennlive Split Pa. Supreme Court rejects latest challenge to Gov. Wolf's coronavirus business shutdown order

Erie Times-News Cong. Mike Kelly (R-16th) is 30 pounds lighter after COVID-19 bout

Pennlive When can Pa. return to normal? Roadmap emerges, although distance uncertain

speed broadband internet to nearly 2,000 residents and businesses in rural Erie, Crawford and Mercer counties, the agency announced Tuesday. The funding will be dispersed over 10 years and is part of the Connect America Fund Phase II auction.

Armstrong Telecommunications is required to build out 40 percent of the broadband network for the assigned homes and businesses within the first three years. The 2,000 rural residents and businesses will have access to minimum internet speeds of at least 1 Gbps for downloads and 500 Mbps for uploads. Most of the customers that will be targeted are in Erie County. Of the 1,949 locations where broadband access will be provided, 1,876 are in Erie County; 64 are in Crawford County; and nine are in Mercer County. All but \$55,805 of the grant will be spent in Erie County.

The investment will bring the total amount dedicated to Pennsylvania from the Connect America Fund Phase II auction to more than \$36.65 million for 9,673 locations. "Getting gigabit-speed broadband to rural communities in northwestern Pennsylvania will make a real difference in the region," FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said in a statement. "Nearly 2,000 rural homes and businesses that don't currently have broadband service will get connected to some of the highest speed internet available through this support. I'm glad the FCC can help bridge the digital divide in rural Pennsylvania, and we look forward to continuing to find ways to make a difference in these communities."

Surveys have shown that only a quarter of the geographically area of Erie County south of Interstate 90 lacks high-speed broadband, while nearly nearly 100 percent of the geographical area north of the interstate has access. Much of the expansion in Erie County is expected to take place east of Peach Street, south of I-90 and west of Interstate 86. – **Erie Times-News; video from WICU-TV, Erie**

With Pennsylvania's schools officially closed through the remainder of the academic year, the implementation of remote learning is now the highest priority for school districts. Unfortunately, there are thousands of students locally — and even thousands more statewide — who don't have access to a computer and an internet connection, tools necessary for online instruction.

It is against that backdrop that a coalition of area nonprofits, universities and technology companies have banded together to find a solution to this "digital divide" and bring both computers and internet access to students who lack those important educational tools. It's another shining example of Pittsburgh organizations working to find solutions to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 outbreak.

"Beyond the Laptops" is a grassroots effort of the community group Neighborhood Allies, self-driving technology company Aurora Innovation, the Pittsburgh Technology Council, the University of Pittsburgh and Computer Reach. The goal is to purchase and refurbish more than 3,000 laptops for students and families who don't have computer access. The group hopes to deliver a thousand computers in the next two weeks and 1,000 more by mid-May.

The multifaceted effort has several organizations lending their help and expertise to the cause. Computer Reach refurbishes the computers; the University of Pittsburgh has set up an IT desk for assistance; Carnegie Mellon University and Meta Mesh Wireless Communities are partnering to set up internet networks in communities with the greatest need.

Although schools are not required to complete 180 days of instruction this year because of the shutdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic, state education officials are encouraging districts to continue instruction remotely to avoid having students fall too far behind. Districts typically see a drop in learning during the summer months, the “summer slide” as it is often called, and the loss of three months of in-school instruction this year could only exacerbate the problem. That’s why getting computer equipment into the hands of students is vitally important to maintaining their education cycle. It is even more crucial in districts with a large percentage of low-income students.

Pittsburgh Public Schools has ordered 5,000 laptops to go with its supply of 2,500, and received a donation of 599 from the University of Pittsburgh. The Clairton School District has launched a fundraising campaign to purchase a Chromebook for its students. The state Department of Education is providing equity grants of up to \$5 million for districts to buy laptops, internet hot spots and instructional materials.

The school year has been thrown into chaos by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shutdowns. The ability to switch to remote learning presents challenges for many school districts, but the efforts of community organizations to find solutions should be applauded. Their work will help assure that students can continue necessary coursework.

— **Pittsburgh Post-Gazette editorial**

The Instagram ad popped up on mobile phones in March — “Quarantine in the Poconos.”

Another ad asked, “Are you looking to escape the epicenter?” With the pandemic spreading quickly, short-term rental firms and property owners on Airbnb marketed the Poconos area as a virus-free zone. But that campaign also helped spread COVID-19 in the Poconos and along the I-80 and I-78 corridors in eastern Pennsylvania, local officials say.

Hazleton Mayor Jeff Cusat said on Tuesday that 3% of the city's population and that of the surrounding towns in Luzerne County have tested positive for the virus. Cargill Meat Solutions temporarily closed its meatpacking plant last week just outside of Hazleton because the virus had infected nearly 20% of its employees. Workers also tested positive at an Amazon distribution center and a Mission Foods tortilla plant in the Hazleton area, the local Standard-Speaker newspaper has reported. “A lot of people fled the New York area when it broke out for their safety and they brought [COVID-19] here,” Cusat said. “The numbers are alarming and it did jump up on us quickly.”

Monroe County — the Poconos gateway — now records Pennsylvania's highest COVID-19 infection rate, 46.7 cases for every 10,000 residents. Second is Lehigh County with 45.6 cases and, third, Luzerne County, at 44.5, state Health Department data show. Philadelphia has a substantially lower infection rate of 40.1 cases for every 10,000 residents.

The Poconos region's ties to North Jersey and New York — and thus the flow of commuters, family, and friends between the two areas — are driving the explosion of COVID-19 cases, local officials say. The area has remade itself over the last two decades into something of a New York bedroom community. Outsiders also own thousands of second or vacation homes, and a tourism industry of time-share units, hotels, and

water parks draws half a million visitors to the area on weekends during peak tourism season.

But instead of good times, fear of the virus has driven people to the Poconos area over the last month. "People wanted to get away from New York. If it was you or I, it would be the same thing," said State Sen. Mario Scavello (R., Monroe). Airbnb, Vrbo, and other firms list 3,000 homes for short-term rentals among Pike, Northampton, Carbon, and Monroe Counties, Scavello noted. At some of these, officials have observed four or five cars parked outside, indicating packed-to-the-walls homes.

Scavello asked state officials to clarify that short-term rentals were not "life-sustaining businesses" under Gov. Tom Wolf's COVID-19 orders. Dennis M. Davis, the secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, sent Airbnb Inc. a letter asking the company to comply with the shutdown orders on April 7. DCED spokesperson Casey Smith said Tuesday that Vrbo confirmed receipt of the letter but Airbnb has not. "We're watching them," Scavello said of the short-term rentals. "What are you going to do? We would rather them not sign new leases until we get out of this mess."

Meanwhile in Hazleton, Mayor Cusat readily acknowledges the big differences between his city with its Latino population and the Poconos: "There are no short-term rentals in Hazleton. Nobody is coming to Hazleton to vacation." But there are similar dynamics. Many people who live in Hazleton have friends or family in the New York area. Some of them escaped the New York virus epicenter for Hazleton but may have brought the virus with them. And, Hazleton residents still travel back and forth to New York.

Last week, Cargill Meat Solutions shuttered its 900-employee meatpacking plant in Hazleton after scores of employees tested positive for COVID-19. Union officials on Monday put the number of infected workers at 162. Cargill says it will reopen the plant when it's safe. The same union — the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 — also represents workers at the Mission Foods tortilla plant, just north of I-80 in Mountain Top. Because of concerns over COVID-19, union officials say, many of the plant's hourly employees are calling out sick. Plant manager Hugo Andrade told the Standard-Speaker last week that 22 of the 510 employees at its plant in Crestwood Industrial Park tested positive for COVID-19. Andrade said that "there is no indication that the employees contracted COVID-19 while present at our facility." The company could not be reached for comment.

An Amazon distribution warehouse employee has cited about three dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the distribution center in the Humboldt Industrial Park. Amazon spokesperson Alyssa Bronikowski did not provide the Standard-Speaker with the number of cases, saying, "We're continuing to monitor the situation in our facilities and corporate offices, and we are taking proactive measures to protect employees and associates who have been in contact with anyone who has been diagnosed or becomes ill."

Two elected Hazleton-area officials, in an April 9 letter, called on Gov. Wolf and the state to enforce safe workplace guidelines on big employers to protect employees. "The greater Hazleton area has seen dramatic community spread of the virus," State Rep. Tarah Toohil (R., Luzerne) wrote in the letter. "We believe this spread has been caused, in part, by large employers unwilling or unable to adhere to Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine's directive." "It's disturbing to see Luzerne

County has become a hot spot for the spread of COVID-19," added State Rep. Gerald Mullery (D., Luzerne). "I have heard from numerous constituents who are fearful of contracting the virus because their employers are not following the guidelines issued by the state." The letter did not name the employers.

To control the pandemic spread in Hazleton, Cusat has enacted an 8 p.m.-to-6 a.m. curfew except for those traveling for work. The town also placed restrictions on ride-sharing. Four or more nonfamily members are not allowed to ride in a vehicle or gather in a public area, the order says. Police are enforcing the curfew, but Mayor Cusat said he did not know how many people may have been cited for violations. "If people stick to the CDC guidelines, we will pull out of this OK," Cusat said.

Scavello, the state senator, believes that the region's health data could underestimate the extent of the pandemic in the area. When people are tested, they are identified by their driver's license or other identification. So if people from New York or New Jersey test positive in the Poconos area, they are not counted as from Pennsylvania, officials said. Scavello said, "I had two people drive up from New York and go right to the hospital because both the husband and wife had [COVID-19]."

– *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Stay safe

