



June 22, 2020

[**Cyberscoop**](#)
[**Philadelphia-area**](#)
[**health system says**](#)
[**it 'isolated' a**](#)
[**malware attack**](#)

Almost 1,200 homes and businesses in Sullivan County will have another broadband internet service option by the middle of 2021. Comcast recently announced the expansion of Xfinity internet service in the boroughs of Eagles Mere and Laporte and the township of Shrewsbury. Service to some addresses will be available by the end of 2020, with the full expansion complete by the summer of 2021.

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Pittsburgh Tribune-Review
[Pennsylvania hopes to avoid coronavirus surge seen in other states](#)

Pennlive
[Electing a new Pa. House speaker](#)

This expansion involves no public money, [which is unusual for a broadband expansion in such a rural area](#). "With thousands of Pennsylvanians learning and working from their homes, the importance of keeping people connected during this time of COVID-19 is critical," Sen. Gene Yaw said in a press release. "I appreciate Comcast's commitment to closing the digital divide in Sullivan County and addressing the needs of our unserved residents." "The Sullivan County Commissioners and the Sullivan County Broadband Task Force were elated to learn of Comcast's decision to expand its communication infrastructure in Sullivan County," said Commissioner Brian Hoffman. "Improving our citizens' access to high-speed internet has been an overarching priority of this and prior Boards of Commissioners."

Comcast will be providing its Internet Essentials program, which "provides broadband for low-income Americans for \$9.95 per month, online digital literacy training and the opportunity to purchase a computer for \$150," according to Robert Grove, Comcast Keystone vice president of communications. People who do not yet have Comcast internet and are eligible for an array of government programs, like supplementary Social Security, SNAP (food stamps), and Medicaid are eligible to [apply for Internet Essentials](#).

Comcast had not yet finalized the number of miles of new fiber line that will be needed to complete the expansion, Grove said. The company announced a similar expansion in Clearfield and Cambria counties to about 3,900 addresses as well. Currently, Comcast offers internet service only with introductory rates starting at \$39.99 per month before taxes and fees in Williamsport, [according to the Xfinity website](#). – **NorthcentralPA.com**

Comcast will continue to offer free access to its 1.5 million public Xfinity Wi-Fi hotspots through the end of 2020, [the company announced](#). "We saw a huge jump in usage after we opened up our public hotspots, and we're excited to keep them open through the end of the year as the nation begins taking steps to reopen," the company said in a statement. Comcast is also [extending its offer for 60 days](#) of free internet service to new customers on its Internet Essentials tier, which is designed for low-income customers. That offer was set to expire June 30th but also will continue through the end of the year..

Comcast was one of several broadband internet providers to commit to the Federal Communications Commission's [Keep Americans Connected pledge](#) back in March, as the coronavirus kept people homebound and reliant on internet connections for working and schooling remotely. The ISPs promised not to terminate services for residences or small businesses that were unable to pay their bills because of the pandemic, and to waive late fees. The pledge also included a provision to open Wi-Fi hotspots to "any American who needs them."

On April 30th, Comcast announced it [posted revenue](#) of \$26.6 billion for the first quarter of 2020, a 0.9 percent decline year over year, and net income of \$2.1 billion, a 40 percent drop from the year-ago quarter. And even though the company lost 409,000 cable TV customers in Q1 according to its earnings report, it [added 477,000 internet customers](#), which the company said was its best quarterly number in more than a decade. Wireless revenue for the quarter was up 52 percent. – **The Verge**

The size of the investment necessary to bridge the urban/rural divide in Pennsylvania is in the billions of dollars, telecommunications experts and government officials tell us. The trouble is that some of those potential investment dollars are currently locked up into costs that landline telcos incur complying with outdated state regulations. Regulatory reform legislation, Senate Bill 1112, recently introduced in the state Senate by longtime

[expected to lead toward leadership shake-up in GOP caucus](#)

broadband champion Kristin Phillips-Hill, R-York, would reduce costs for the landline telcos, without sacrificing long-held consumer protections.

The regulations, administered by Pennsylvania's Public Utility Commission were set down in an era when the landline phone carriers monopolized service — only voice then and none of it wireless. That landscape is unrecognizable today. In what has become a highly competitive industry, landline telcos now provide less than 12% of total voice subscriptions in the state.

The regulations targeted for elimination under Sen. Phillips-Hill's legislation are no longer needed to ensure the Public Utility Commission's regulatory requirement of "adequate, efficient, safe and reasonable" voice service. The compliance costs are especially burdensome to my member companies, the rural telcos, or RLECs, who built and continue to maintain the traditional landline networks on which broadband services ride. These networks provide voice and internet to customers in some of the most remote areas of the state, the areas where it's costliest to provide service. The cost of regulatory compliance diverts investment from the infrastructure needed not only to maintain the networks but to keep pace with advancing technologies as well.

At the same time, key consumer safeguards are left intact under Senate Bill 1112: the Public Utility Commission will maintain oversight over universal service, slamming and cramming of customers' bills, telecommunications relay service for deaf, hard of hearing and speech disabled individuals, and, perhaps most important of all, the requirement that RLECs maintain access to service for all in their coverage areas — they will continue to be the carriers of last resort.

Many other states have adapted to an increasingly competitive telecommunications climate by streamlining their regulatory structures, and recently the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Ajit Pai, credited updated federal regulations as one of the reasons why broadband service has remained robust under the surge in use during the coronavirus pandemic. Sen. Phillips-Hill's legislation is another prospective step in a government/industry partnership that got Pennsylvania out of the blocks early with broadband deployment. Back in 2004, the General Assembly approved legislation, Act 183, that required full broadband deployment in exchange for some regulatory modernization. Now it's time for state government and the RLECs, working together, to take the next step. — ***Letter to Wilkes-Barre Citizens' Voice from PTA President Steven Samara***

Pennsylvania election officials recently found out what their counterparts in New Jersey will likely discover: Tallying an unprecedented volume of mail-in ballots is no small task. Spurred by the coronavirus pandemic, the two states and many others are promoting or expanding the vote-by-mail option. The goal is not to eliminate in-person voting, but to enable people who want to avoid lines and crowds at polling places to mark their ballots and have them count.

Sadly, several thousand voters who used the option in Pennsylvania's June 2 primary ended up disenfranchised for reasons that included missing the return deadline for completed ballots. The July 7 primary will be New Jersey's first statewide election conducted mostly by mail, although school board, municipal, and special elections in May were solely by mail due to the shutdown and stay-at-home orders. Nearly 10% of all ballots in those contests were rejected because of difficulties with signature verification or other issues.

The job of protecting the rights of voters and the integrity of elections is overseen by the states and administered mostly by county or local election officials and personnel. New Jersey reached an agreement Tuesday with the League of Women Voters and the NAACP to offer primary voters whose signatures on mailed-in ballots are challenged by their local election boards the opportunity to remedy discrepancies. And in Pennsylvania, Gov. Tom Wolf

supports a proposed legislative fix that would enable counties to begin processing early mailed-in ballots weeks before election day.

Five states, including [Oregon, Utah, and Colorado](#), conduct elections almost exclusively by mail and have done so for years. But in this presidential election — and pandemic — year, a lot is being asked of election officials and voters in states that, until recently, have not much utilized the option. The shift from polling places to mailboxes or ballot drop boxes is an institutional and cultural change that risks alienating some voters and could depress turnout.

So voter education is key. The Wolf administration promoted voting by mail through its digital platforms, including social media, radio, and TV, using about \$1 million in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act money. It plans to expand the campaign in advance of the November election. This week, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy appeared in a video for his YouTube channel to demonstrate the relative ease of voting by mail; his "Vote. Sign. Seal. Return" campaign also will include social media platforms and radio spots. Officials in both states say additional federal help is needed so their counties can better prepare for the high turnouts expected in November.

Public confidence in elections has been battered in recent decades, and President Donald Trump's [baseless characterization](#) of voting by mail (which he has done) as a partisan ploy that fosters fraud hasn't helped. Primary day debacles [in Wisconsin](#), and most recently, [in Georgia](#), haven't helped either. But most voters see casting a ballot — in person or by mail — as a cherished right, a duty that requires serious thought and preparation. Amid the public health fears and ferocious politics of this election year, states like Pennsylvania and New Jersey must be prepared to do their duty as well.

— ***Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial**

State lawmakers should cancel their summer break. It would be irresponsible for them to be out of session for more than two months when they have so much important work to do. Their long recess is unnecessary every year, but this year even more so. They're already behind because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Topping the list of things to do is completing next year's state budget. The Legislature approved only five months of funding in May because of the unknown financial hit from the shutdown. Every state House member is up for reelection, and I'm sure they're eager to focus on their work in their districts. That's what they do during the summer when they are not in session at the Capitol in Harrisburg. A lot of that time is spent meeting with constituents, visiting events, presenting checks from state grants and so on — which doubles as campaigning.

Having to be in session, even if only virtually because of the pandemic, would cut into that time. But that should be their priority. It should be their priority every year. But this year especially. I've previously [decried how little time](#) our state representatives and senators spend in session. Last year, the House held 70 voting sessions and the Senate 52. In 2018, each chamber had 47 session days. Only so much progress can be made outside of sessions on big issues. Lawmakers need to gather to prioritize, negotiate and line up votes.

The House plans to be out of session from June 25 though Sept. 14. When it returns, there are only 13 session days on the calendar for the rest of the year — five in September, seven in October and one in November. The calendar on the Senate website lists its last session date as June 30. The calendar for the rest of the year is blank, so I can't tell you how many voting days they're committed to holding. That doesn't leave many days to complete the budgeting process. Last month, lawmakers approved, and the governor quickly signed, a [\\$26 billion short-term budget](#) that lasts only through Nov. 30, except for schools, which were funded for the year.

With the state projected to lose \$5 billion in revenue because of the economic shutdown, legislators will have to make difficult spending decisions. Those decisions will be even tougher if Gov. Tom Wolf demands spending increases he had proposed in his budget before the pandemic hit. The budget isn't the only hard work that's looming.

Are lawmakers really serious about reforming laws that govern police operations, as many have called for in the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis and the protests in the Lehigh Valley, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and other Pennsylvania towns? Or were their comments just legislative lip service? Before he retired, House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny, requested a special legislative session on the issue. There isn't going to be much time for that if legislators aren't in session most of the summer.

Lawmakers also must find time to make sure Pennsylvania is prepared for the presidential election. The primary showed holes in the system, most notably the ability for counties to swiftly count mail-in ballots. Legislators could help them by allowing those ballots to be opened and processed prior to Election Day. People aren't going to be as patient waiting days to find out who won the presidency. Those are three meaty issues. And that's not all that's on the Legislature's plate. Problems such as charter school reform, gun violence and legislative redistricting still haven't been addressed. That's a lot to tackle, too much to be taking the summer off from voting. – **Allentown Morning Call**



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