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Politico

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Harford County (MD) government and Armstrong Utilities, a local cable and internet services provider, are collaborating on an effort to secure USDA grants to extend service to households in northern Harford County, where many residents do not have reliable internet service.

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The initiative coincides with the Harford County Council's recent approval of Bill 19-017 to renew Armstrong's cable franchise agreement, granting the Butler, Pennsylvania-based company the ability to "construct, operate and maintain a cable television system" in Harford County over the next 15 years, according to the bill. The council approved the bill unanimously during its June 11 legislative session.

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The county government is currently working with a consultant, CTC Technology & Energy, of Kensington, to assist Armstrong as it applies to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for grant funds through agency programs to serve "under-served rural areas," according to county government spokesperson Cindy Mumby. "The consultant is in the process of helping Armstrong decide how much of the grant funding would be applied for, how much the cost of service would be," Mumby said Thursday, noting there could be opportunities to find grants from other sources.

The Hill

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Associated Press

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The county government, which recently sent a survey to residents of northern Harford regarding their internet service, is paying CTC and will provide data to the consultant, Mumby said. County officials expect they will be fully reimbursed by the state through the governor's rural broadband initiative, she said. Officials have not yet determined the timeline for extending service or how much grant funding they will need, according to Mumby. "We really are still in the early stages of this process and gathering and providing information," she said. "There has been a lot of interest, understandably, in the northern part of the county, and we are doing what we can to move the process forward."

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The new cable franchise agreement requires Armstrong to provide service to all parts of its franchise area where the population density is "equal to or greater than" 15 occupied dwellings per mile, "or a

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**Philadelphia
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election reform are
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moment three
decades in the
making**

proportionate fraction thereof as measured from the nearest point of the Cable System distribution network,” according to the agreement. That population density has been reduced from 30 occupied residences per mile in the prior agreement, Councilman Chad Shrodes, who represents northern Harford County, said during a June 4 public hearing on Bill 19-017.

Shrodes noted another positive development in the new agreement, in which a “cost-sharing formula” is used to determine how Armstrong and customers in “isolated areas” more than 300 feet from an existing cable distribution network will split the cost of extending service to their residences. Shrodes also highlighted the promise between Armstrong and the county to partner on seeking grants from the USDA “to further enhance connectivity of our residents to the rest of the world.”

Randy Nungester, general manager for Armstrong Utilities, announced the partnership during the June 4 public hearing. “We have positioned ourselves well for these grants, as well as other funding opportunities that evolve from this partnership,” Nungester told council members. “We share a mutual goal to provide access to broadband services, which are much needed, to the citizens of Harford County.” Nungester also said, should the council approve the franchise agreement bill, Armstrong will soon announce plans to upgrade its existing infrastructure to “provide our customers in Harford County — and your constituents — the absolute, most advanced network and services in the United States for generations to come.” “We’ve enjoyed our close relationship with Harford County and look forward to serving the area for many years to come,” he said.

The previous 15-year franchise agreement dates to 2003, when it was held by Clearview Partners. Armstrong took it over when it acquired Clearview’s Harford County network in 2008, Shrodes said. He told Nungester that constituents who have service through Armstrong say the company provides “reliable, fast, basically outstanding service, but it’s those individuals that are not connected, those are the ones I hear from.” “The lack of reliable cable service in northern Harford County is, without question, the number-one constituent concern in my rural legislative district,” Shrodes added.

Shrodes must use a “hotspot” device to connect to the internet when at his residence in Norrisville, and he has satellite television service, he said in a follow-up interview. Shrodes said he often goes to his council office in Bel Air for better internet service, such as when he wants to post videos to his Facebook page. He also cited the challenges other residents face when they want to use the internet to do schoolwork, work from home or stream movies. “The rest of the world continues to move faster and faster, and if you live in certain rural areas it’s like time has stood still,” Shrodes said. “I think every student, anyone that has the ability to work from home, should be able to do so.”

The prior franchise agreement expired last fall, but Shrodes and Council Attorney Charles Kearney have been working with Armstrong since January of 2018 to negotiate a new agreement, the councilman said. Shrodes thanked Kearney for “working tirelessly” to negotiate with Armstrong over the past year and a half. The council attorney said during the public hearing that “it has been a pleasure” to negotiate with the provider. “I believe that this agreement is fair to both parties,”

Kearney said. "Each side didn't get everything they wanted, but we're each satisfied with what we ended up with."

Shrodes said he hopes that, with the new franchise agreement and the partnership with the county government to seek grants to expand service, "one day we can connect everyone in Harford County, regardless of where you live, because I think there is a severe disadvantage in many ways." Larger providers such as Comcast and Verizon have extended their infrastructure as far north as Forest Hill and the Madonna community in Jarrettsville, as well as Darlington, Level and Havre de Grace, Shrodes said during the follow-up interview. He said Armstrong covers "over 90 percent" of northern Harford, though.

Armstrong's service area in Harford County starts slightly north of Bel Air and extends into Forest Hill, Jarrettsville and points north to Fawn Grove and Stewartstown into southern York County, Pennsylvania, according to Dave Wittmann, vice president of cable marketing for Armstrong. Wittmann said he could not give out customer numbers, though, since Armstrong is a private company. Armstrong is the 11th-largest cable operator in the U.S., serving customers in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and New York, according to Wittmann.

Wittmann said company officials hope to work with Harford County, should grants come through, and "find ways to fill in a few of the gaps [in northern Harford] where the homes are so far apart." Working through the USDA's program to expand broadband internet service in rural communities, company officials want to "try to find ways to make it economically feasible to service sparsely-populated areas," he said.

— **Baltimore Sun**

As AT&T and Time Warner mark the one-year anniversary of their merger, they're preparing to debut the most visible manifestation of their marriage: a streaming service that will showcase HBO content and compete with Netflix. For AT&T executives, the first year as a media and telecom giant has been about setting the stage to better compete in the entertainment industry. Among the changes, the company reorganized Time Warner, now called WarnerMedia, to put its entertainment brands under the same leadership. It tapped AT&T veteran John Stankey to lead the integration as WarnerMedia's CEO. It lost several entertainment executives, including HBO and Turner's longtime CEOs, and replaced them with former NBCUniversal chairman Bob Greenblatt. And it launched an advertising and analytics company called Xandr.

AT&T analysts say it's too early to judge such a large and ambitious deal, but Wall Street isn't the only audience that's watching. Customers are waiting for the Dallas-based company to launch the big, splashy and lower-priced offerings it has promised. The combined companies also have to prove they can compete head-to-head with streaming competitors, maintain WarnerMedia's image as a magnet for creative talent and hold onto the Hollywood magic with hit TV shows and movies. Geetha Ranganathan, a senior media analyst for Bloomberg Intelligence, said AT&T's ownership of "a bunch of A-list media properties" alone isn't a winning strategy. It must demonstrate entertainment know-how. "At the end of the day, it's going to become a

bunch of telephone guys running a media business," she said. "That's a little bit of a gray area. And it's too early to say one thing or the other, but it definitely presents a challenge. These are not seasoned media executives. They are telecom veterans." WarnerMedia executives declined requests to be interviewed for this story.

Dallas-based AT&T's quest to become a media behemoth began more than three years ago. The company announced in fall 2016 that it had reached a deal to buy New York-based Time Warner, which includes HBO, Turner and Warner Bros. The deal was valued at \$108.7 billion, including debt. At the time, AT&T chief executive Randall Stephenson called Time Warner and AT&T "a perfect match."

"We'll have the world's best premium content with the networks to deliver it to every screen," he said in a statement when the deal was announced.

The deal was tied up for years as AT&T fought an antitrust challenge by the Justice Department. The merger closed last summer on June 14, two days after a judge sided with AT&T in the court battle. But AT&T had to keep some of WarnerMedia's businesses separate until February, when the Justice Department failed in its attempt to appeal. As AT&T faced opposition from the Justice Department – and President Donald Trump – Stephenson campaigned for the deal by pledging that it would unleash innovation and lead to video products that customers love.

Stephenson wrote a memo he called "the 'Magna Carta' of our merger." In it, he said the reasons for the deal "all boil down to one thing: We want to get the most content to the most people at the lowest prices, delivered on any screen, particularly mobile." AT&T has not yet announced the name of its new streaming service or its price, but its leaders are banking that it will be a hit. It will feature WarnerMedia's extensive library of content, from movies like *A Star is Born* and *Aquaman* to TV shows like *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. The beta version will launch by the end of the year.

Stephenson said last month at a J.P. Morgan Technology, Media and Communications Conference in Boston that he expects the subscription video-on-demand service to attract "tens of millions of subscribers." Stephenson also said the streaming service will become AT&T's "key video product." But will it stand out in a crowded field? Netflix's service costs \$13 a month. Hulu costs \$12 for its ad-free service. And Disney announced an even lower price for its streaming service, Disney+, which will launch in November: \$7 a month.

HBO's streaming service, HBO Now, is pricier than those offerings at \$15 a month. And AT&T's new streaming service will tack on additional TV shows and movies, likely increasing the price. A lot of the merger's success will ride on the new streaming service, said Ranganathan of Bloomberg Intelligence. "If they keep the price high and don't have the content to back it up, they are going to see people cancel in droves, which is not going to be good," she said. "That's their biggest near-term challenge."

Entertainment companies are pouring money into producing and licensing content. Netflix, for example, is expected to spend \$15.1 billion this year on content, according to Bloomberg estimates. Stephenson said WarnerMedia spends about \$14 billion a

year on original content and licensing rights. HBO, in particular, has stepped up spending on content, he said. HBO increased its original scripted programming by 50% in 2019, WarnerMedia spokesman Emile Lee said. He declined to provide a dollar amount.

WarnerMedia is using its size and its range of entertainment to develop strong relationships with Hollywood talent. For example, it has worked with actor Michael B. Jordan across various media. He starred in *Just Mercy*, a Warner Bros. Pictures release, and signed a first-look deal for his production company, Outlier Society. Warner Bros. signed an exclusive deal with Mindy Kaling to write and produce TV programming for all of its platforms, from streaming to cable. And it's negotiating a deal with J.J. Abrams, the director and producer behind *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

AT&T may be an entertainment newcomer, but it has been cooking up its strategy for years, said Jay Tucker, executive director of the UCLA Anderson Center for Management of Enterprise in Media, Entertainment and Sports. It began adjusting to the changing ways people consume content ahead of the merger, he said. It's had a stake in several smaller subscription-based services, such as anime streaming service Crunchyroll. In 2016, it launched DirecTV Now, a subscription-based streaming service with a cable-like lineup of live channels. Tucker said AT&T's biggest edge is its existing relationships with millions of customers. "AT&T is uniquely positioned to put the business back in show business," he said. AT&T is looking for new ways to combine its technology with WarnerMedia's entertainment. In New York City, it's building a 20,000-square-foot incubator where it will develop new products and advertisements. The WarnerMedia Innovation Lab is expected to open in early 2020.

In Los Angeles, Warner Bros. Studios is hosting a two-day event this weekend about what 5G could mean for the future of entertainment. The fifth-generation wireless network is expected to bring faster, more reliable mobile service and support virtual reality experiences that could drop a viewer in the middle of a TV show or live sports game. And AT&T previewed how its network and WarnerMedia's content may pair up in the future. At the giant annual technology show in January, CES, people could check out how in-cabin entertainment may look in autonomous vehicles. Warner Bros. and Intel displayed a concept car in which passengers could watch an immersive experience in *Batman's Gotham City* instead of driving.

WarnerMedia's entertainment brands have given the legacy telecom a clever way to draw customers into stores, too. For example, AT&T had a Batmobile in its Chicago store on Michigan Avenue. The display led to a jump in store traffic, AT&T Communications CEO John Donovan said this month at the Credit Suisse Communications Conference. Some stores gave away movie tickets to the Warner Bros. movie, *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald*. Others set up displays to promote HBO's *Game of Thrones*. "We're learning as a company what are these new currencies that you have and how to manage them and execute them," Donovan said at the conference. "So, we're very, very enthused about what WarnerMedia is going to do for the wireless business, for the TV business and so on."

He said store employees can talk about upcoming TV shows and movies with customers while they sell wireless service or answer questions about a new phone. The entertainment brands help them make stronger sales pitches, he said. When campaigning for approval of the deal, Stephenson pledged to offer new services, sustain a tradition of entertainment excellence and play fairly with competitors. But critics say AT&T is using its size and valuable content to strong-arm competitors – and they say prices of AT&T's products are going up, not down.

During the antitrust trial, Sling TV's group president, Warren Schlichting, testified that the deal would give AT&T leverage to force Dish's streaming service, which offers "skinny bundles" and lower prices, to carry more channels. That would ultimately drive up prices for customers, he said. Since then, he said, his predictions have come true. HBO is not available on Dish or Sling TV after the two parties reached an impasse in negotiations last fall. Schlichting said WarnerMedia tried to force the company to pay for subscribers, whether or not they wanted HBO. "We're living through it right now, almost like it was scripted," he said.

Viacom and A+E Networks have also squabbled with AT&T over content licensing – and aired their grievances in public. Schlichting said the merger created a power imbalance. AT&T now has less of a reason to compromise with Dish, since it can gain customers for its own TV services, which have WarnerMedia's content, if customers leave Dish or Sling TV. AT&T is the largest pay-TV company in the country with U-verse, DirecTV and DirecTV Now. "We're damned if we do, damned if we don't," he said. "If we pay the high prices, then they have extorted us. If we don't pay the high prices, they've taken our subscribers."

HBO said Dish is to blame. "Dish has made it apparent that they have no interest in carrying HBO," it said in a statement. "We have made extremely reasonable offers and received no true level of engagement in return." Stephenson also raised red flags last month when he said that AT&T will pull back licensing rights for popular shows and movies from some streaming rivals as it prepares to launch its new service. The merger has yet to fulfill another promise that AT&T made: lowering prices.

In April, in fact, it raised the prices of its DirecTV Now packages \$10 a month. Its price point of \$50 to \$70 a month is lower than some satellite or cable TV packages but more expensive than internet-based rivals like Hulu Live and Sling TV. John Bergmayer, senior counsel of Washington, D.C.-based consumer advocacy group Public Knowledge, said his group opposed the AT&T-Time Warner deal because of concerns that it would stifle independent content producers and reduce competition. As media companies get bigger, he said, they have more influence and ability to raise prices. That may explain what's happening with AT&T. "Maybe they are raising prices because everyone else is," he said. "But one way or the other, they say they wouldn't – and they did." – ***Dallas Morning News***

When Shirley McCormick turned 21, she cast her first ballot amid the backdrop of the Vietnam War. She was the first woman in her family to do so — her mother chose to not vote, and years earlier, her grandmother did not have the right. McCormick, 70, thought of her grandmother as she stood on the steps of the Capitol Rotunda on

Monday, surrounded by white-clad women celebrating the 100th anniversary of Pennsylvania's ratification of the 19th Amendment, which prohibited voting discrimination on the basis of sex. "Voting is such an important thing because it makes such a difference in things in the state, locally, and the country as a whole," said McCormick. "They fought long and hard to get that."

McCormick joined about 100 women in marking the anniversary by signing copies of the 19th Amendment, which passed Congress on June 4, 1919, and was ratified by Pennsylvania 20 days later on June 24. Pennsylvania was the seventh state to approve the amendment, and it became law in 1920, when three-quarters — or 36 — of the then 48 states ratified it.

Still, challenges remained, particularly for women of color, who faced polling taxes and other barriers to casting their ballot. Pat Jordan of Wayne said women who fought for the vote still encountered disapproval while going to the polls. "It's horrifying to think of what these women who were working for the vote had to slog through — at times disrespect, the lack of legal protection, and even their own family and friends finding out what they were doing," she said.

Jordan sees an erasure of women's history today — something she aims to fight by regularly dressing as Carrie Chapman Catt, a member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association who founded the League of Women Voters in 1920, and waving a "votes for women" banner. But State Rep. Joanna McCClinton (D., Phila.) said the anniversary is also about remembering the progress that has been made — and the progress yet to come. "It's power that brings 13 women to the Pennsylvania Senate," she said. "It's power that brings 52 women to the Pennsylvania House. And it will be the same power that will give us a woman one day to lead this commonwealth." —

Philadelphia Inquirer

