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A hyper-local solution for connecting to the Internet could soon give low-income Pittsburghers and those lost in dead zones the tools they need to connect to cyberspace. Meta Mesh LLC, an Allentown-based wireless firm founded two years ago, has taken off since founder Adam Longwill first conceived the idea to boost the strength of Wi-Fi signals in his home. The company uses preconfigured nodes (or routers) and high-powered antennae to connect Wi-Fi from a few dedicated strong signals to nearby neighbors. Users would need permission to opt-in to the neighborhood networks but from

there are connected to the same Internet networks as the nodes at the end of the chain.

It has become a major source of Internet access in the Allentown business district, where it has been up and running since November. The ultimate goal is to connect all networks under one umbrella known as Pitt Mesh. The company charges approximately \$500 for nodes, antennae and installation for anyone who wants to add a node to their home, but Morningside and Braddock are planning to use grant funding to purchase 20 nodes to wire their entire neighborhoods. In Allentown, the Wireless Warrington network was funded through an Urban Redevelopment Authority grant facilitated by the Mount Washington Community Development Corporation. Mr. Longwill hopes that individuals who want to see the cause grow in their neighborhood will help kick-start the process by buying their first node. "What happens is if you have an Internet connection already you can put up one of our nodes [one or more routers] and

you can put it outdoors and if your neighbor a couple doors down wants to extend the network he or she puts up another node, it catches the signal from your house and repeats it down the block," Mr. Longwill explained.

In Pittsburgh, where city chief technologist Debra Lam already has expressed interest in creating free public wireless access for residents, the company has already earned an important fan. This week, Mayor Bill Peduto sent out a tweet mentioning Mesh Net with the caption "Who Needs an ISP?" Tim McNulty, spokesman for Mr. Peduto, came short of calling the tweet an endorsement. However, he noted that the city's Innovation Roadmap discusses the pursuit of public Wi-Fi and pointed out a study from Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz School that said the city's best options for public Wi-Fi are community networks such as Meta Mesh. "The city is supportive of all types of technology that can be used to bridge the digital divide, and Meta Mesh is one such technology," said Mr.



McNulty in an email message.

The Federal Communication Commission's 2015 Broadband Progress report notes that 17 percent of all Americans and 53 percent of rural Americans lack access to broadband Internet with download speeds of 25 megabits per second and upload speeds of 3 megabits per second. Mr. Longwill, a former English major who took it upon himself to learn the ins and outs of wireless networking two years ago, said he started setting up point-to-point networks with friends but decided to expand to neighborhoods after realizing how many people would stand to benefit. "A lot of people can't imagine living without the Internet today, but there are a ton of people who don't have it in their homes or don't have it in their communities without having to take a bus. For a lot of people, even in 2015, Internet access is like it was for someone on the cutting edge in 2002," he said.

Becky Zajdel, Meta Mesh customer relationship manager and a North Braddock native, said an opportunity to bridge the digital divide was the main reason she jumped on board with the company. "Various people from neighborhoods where they have limited or slow Internet access are interested [as well as] people who are interested in democratizing information and that's really what we're all about. We're not an ISP. We want to educate people to maintain these networks themselves but we also want to be a resource for them," she said.

Noting that the solution isn't designed to be a wholesale replacement of Internet Service Providers such as Comcast, Mr. Longwill said it could still go a long way toward providing access to low-income users and could help municipalities save on fees paid for wireless services. "Everyone can pitch in a little bit, buy a router and extend Internet access throughout their neighborhood," he said. The company will launch Kickstarter campaign set for the first week of July designed to raise \$100,000 to launch Meta Mesh across the country. – *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

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A [bill to raise millions to fund 911 emergency call centers](#) is headed to Gov. Tom Wolf for enactment following final passage in the Legislature. The Senate voted 49-0 on Thursday to increase the fees paid by cell phone, landline and voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) customers to \$1.65 a month per line.

Currently, [every landline user pays somewhere between \\$1 and \\$1.50 every month, depending on what county they live in.](#) Cell phones and voice over Internet Protocol phone service each carry a \$1 per month. Those fees haven't changed since 1990, according to the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. A Wolf spokesman says he'll sign the legislation. The centers require about \$292 million a year to operate, but the current phone bill fee is projected to only generate \$190 million this year so counties have had to subsidize the centers using revenue generated by their property tax. The proposed higher fees are expected to generate \$314 million a year, according to a [House Appropriations Committee fiscal note](#). Costs have gone up not just because of inflation but because of the advent of wireless, said Doug Hill, executive director of the county commissioners association.

The 911 centers have had to put systems in place to locate where the wireless calls are originating as well as equipment and staffing to handle the higher volume of calls resulting from more people having the convenience of having a phone close at hand to report emergencies. The county commissioners' association says the bill also reduces overhead, improves planning and paves the way for modern technological upgrades. The legislation gives 911 centers in Allentown and Bethlehem four years to pursue consolidation with their county systems. – *pennlive.com*



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