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Atlantic Broadband, the nation's eighth-largest cable operator, Tuesday revealed the results of research conducted by Independence Research, LLC of small- and medium-sized businesses which measured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on business sentiment and SMB's technology investment plans.

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted nearly every business in the United States. Many have been forced to temporarily or permanently close physical operations or transition employees to work from home situations. As an internet, phone and TV provider for businesses, Atlantic Broadband has worked closely with its customers throughout the pandemic to adapt its processes and to ensure connectivity, while network upgrades helped deliver needed capacity and reliability.

Atlantic Broadband commissioned Independence Research to survey small business IT decision-makers on their current sentiment and to understand how IT investment priorities may have changed over the past three months. Key findings of the research include:

- Small Businesses Are Staying Positive – Despite the many challenges faced by SMBs, more than half (56 percent) of businesses surveyed are positively navigating the crisis and believe their business will emerge as strong or stronger than before. Less than 8 percent of respondents were pessimistic or anticipating permanent closure.
- Impact to Business Operations – Over 18 percent of businesses surveyed said they were forced to temporarily cease operations during COVID-19.
- Working from Home – More than half (52 percent) of SMBs surveyed indicated that working from home is not an option for their employees. 15 percent indicated that at least some portion of their workforce will continue to permanently work from home in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Preparing for a Second Wave – A majority (56 percent) of businesses feel prepared for a second pandemic wave, while only 21 percent of respondents feel unprepared.
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When asked what the most important change their business will make when the U.S. economy stabilizes, priorities included budget considerations, cleanliness and health-related policy changes, an increase in remote work and virtual communications/events. Many businesses also indicated a planned transition to online and eCommerce capabilities. "In order to offer business customers optimal services and support, it is critical that telecom and IT providers understand how profoundly the COVID-19 pandemic will impact their customers in both the short and long-term," said John Romagnoli, Senior Director, Commercial Products, Atlantic Broadband. "While we were pleasantly surprised to see that SMBs have a cautiously optimistic outlook, they are clearly wrestling with critically important decisions including how to work remotely in the most effective manner and technologies they will require as regional economies re-open and the possibility of regional COVID-19 hotspots."

Key findings of the IT investment research include:

- IT Budgets Remain – Two-thirds of surveyed businesses said they plan to keep 2020 IT spending intact. 19 percent plan to increase their IT spending and only 17 percent plan to reduce their budget.

- Investing in Collaboration – IT spending will overwhelmingly focus on video conferencing and collaboration technology, followed by internet upgrades and cybersecurity.
- Customer Support is Key – Business respondents will prioritize customer support as they move forward from COVID-19. After customer service and support, faster internet was a high priority over lower priced services, indicating that customers are willing to spend more for assurances that they will have the services they need to operate.
- Reliability is King – In addition to customer service, small businesses are looking for true partnership from their vendors in order to manage effectively in the aftermath of the pandemic. Where reliability has historically ranked high on SMB priorities, it will increase dramatically post-pandemic.
- Increased Appetite for Bandwidth – The survey findings revealed that that SMB interest in Gigabit internet speed has grown significantly, along with the importance of upstream broadband capacity.
- “We are seeing SMB owners and IT leaders stepping back to try to refocus their priorities and spending as they emerge from the crisis phase of COVID-19,” said Matt Davis, Founder and Principal Analyst, Independence Research. “Many of these businesses are planning to maintain or increase their technology investments, but they will direct spending on technologies that will directly impact their success post-pandemic. More importantly, they’ll be looking for technology partners that can guarantee reliability and quality service.”

This May 2020 survey was conducted of over 500 U.S. small business IT decision-makers located in areas of Atlantic Broadband’s footprint. Experts were surveyed across professional services, healthcare, manufacturing, construction and other vertical markets. The majority of those surveyed work for organizations with fewer than 25 employees. – **ABB news release**

As school districts plan for the fall and healthcare providers rethink services amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for reliable, broadband internet in rural Pennsylvania is more critical than ever. “This is an issue that has risen to the top, and we need to make sure that we keep it there,” said state Rep. Pam Snyder, a Democrat from Greene County in the state’s far southwest corner.

In the last few years, Snyder has partnered with state Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill, R-York County, to become advocates for unserved and underserved rural Pennsylvania communities that lack access to high-speed broadband, estimated at more than 500,000 by Gov. Tom Wolf’s administration. The two are co-founders of the General Assembly’s bicameral Broadband Caucus, which champions access for rural and underserved areas.

When the pandemic hit, schools — from elementary to college level — were forced to transition to online learning, and telemedicine, which involves patients visiting with physicians via live video, became a normal part of everyday life. Phillips-Hill, chairwoman of the Senate Communications and Technology Committee, said the lack of access to broadband for small, rural districts “really impedes what they can offer their students.” As for telemedicine, Phillips-Hill said that a WellSpan Health official told her in the midst of the pandemic that the system hosted about 1,900 telemedicine visits

in 2019 only to see a similar number being hosted per day during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Federal Communications Commission defines rural broadband as a 25 megabits per second download speed and 3 megabits per second upload speed. Expanding broadband is part of Wolf's [Restore PA initiative](#), and Wolf joined with several other governors on a bipartisan letter in June asking President Donald Trump and congressional leaders to continue investing in broadband infrastructure. "An investment in broadband internet connectivity is an investment in our commonwealth's future and prosperity. The critical need for high-speed internet has become clear in light of our efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, as more families work and learn from home, businesses operate online services and patients access medical care through telehealth," Wolf said in a June 25 statement. "Now, as Pennsylvania focuses on our economic recovery," said Wolf, "it's critical that broadband internet access becomes a reality for every community, and especially our rural areas."

Phillips-Hill, however, has criticized Wolf's Restore PA, saying in a September 2019 statement that the administration's plan lacks details and relies on borrowing and a severance tax on the natural gas industry. Instead, Phillips-Hill touted her two Senate resolutions the body has supported. Senate Resolution 47 would form a special legislative commission involving public and private stakeholders to review high-speed broadband services in underserved and unserved Pennsylvania communities.

The second measure, Senate Resolution 48, calls for an investigation and audit into the taxes collected about 20 years ago via phone bills that were supposedly dedicated to building high-speed internet. "We don't have the time right now to repeat the mistakes of the past," Phillips-Hill told the USA Today Network earlier this month.

Wolf's statement said that 18 million Americans and nearly a million Pennsylvanians do not have access to broadband. The federal government has been investing in rural broadband over the last decade, but it doesn't seem Pennsylvania projects have been high on its priority list. The Connect America Fund, started during the Obama administration, distributed \$115 million to 37 states in its first phase, but not Pennsylvania.

In February 2018, the Federal Communications Commission announced a Connect America Fund II that would give out \$2 billion over 10 years to states to build the necessary infrastructure for broadband. Last month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a progress report on the ReConnect program, which included awarding \$744 million through March for more than 80 broadband projects across 34 states encompassing 430,000 rural residents. Pennsylvania, however, was not one of those states.

Meanwhile, state legislators have been addressing the issue, with Phillips-Hill's committee approving three recent bills that would help expand broadband access in Pennsylvania. On June 22, the Communications and Technology Committee approved Senate Bill 835, introduced by state Sen. Wayne Langerholc Jr., R-Cambria County, that would create a broadband accessibility funding program. Projects seeking funding would need to have at least 25 percent private investment.

The bill also eliminates the \$5 million mobile telecommunications broadband investment tax credit, which Phillips-Hill said was unnecessary because 90

percent of spending under the tax credit would have occurred anyway. “We want to incentivize in areas where (broadband) won’t be done,” she said. The committee also moved Senate Bill 1118, introduced by state Sen. Joe Pittman, R-Indiana County, and House Bill 2438, introduced by state Rep. Clint Owlett, R-Tioga County, both of which would allow electric cooperatives to use their existing poles for fiber-optic lines to carry broadband.

Phillips-Hill’s own Senate Bill 1112, which is with the Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure Committee, would remove what she called “regulatory barriers” to expanding broadband during the pandemic. “Over the last few weeks, many Pennsylvanians have had to turn to the internet to work from home, educate their children, seek medical care or apply for assistance and/or waivers from the state and federal government,” she wrote in a co-sponsorship memo in April. “We have heard from many individuals about the challenges this has posed,” she wrote, “and they have asked for the digital divide to be closed sooner rather than later as high-speed internet is needed now during the COVID-19 pandemic more than ever in our history.”

Snyder compared the expansion of broadband to bringing electricity to families in the 1930s. One private-public partnership is happening in her area, with 65 miles of fiber optic planned after she had \$200,000 in state funding approved and another \$1 million in private funding added to jump start the project. Snyder said the project, which will start in Morgantown, W.Va., and then traverse Greene and Washington counties, could give 2,200 homes access to broadband.

Snyder’s House Bill 2055, introduced in November, would allow municipal authorities to build their own broadband networks, which, she said, would help small, rural areas ignored by large companies. “If there is a silver lining in this pandemic,” she said, “it’s that high-speed broadband is on everyone’s minds.” – **Beaver County Times**

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With another school year of distanced learning looming, Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure unveiled plans to help school districts connect with students lacking internet or computers at home. In a news release Monday, the county announced its intention to provide \$650,000 divided between its eight school districts. Under the proposal, the Bangor Area, Bethlehem Area, Easton Area, Nazareth Area and Northampton Area would each get \$100,000 while the Saucon Valley, Pen Argyl Area and Wilson Area school districts would each get \$50,000. “We think this initial investment will pay great dividends for the citizens of Northampton County,” McClure said.

Council President Ron Heckman anticipated council would have questions about the details of the plan but would support the project. “Given the situation we’re in now, I don’t think anyone would have any issue with moving ahead with it,” Heckman said. Many schools across the region already provided students with laptops or Chromebooks, but the coronavirus pandemic highlighted some of the efforts shortcomings. Many families do not have access to high-speed internet needed to watch videos or support group learning programs. Other districts had limited the equipment to older students, leaving them scrambling to find ways for elementary school students to access their classes.

Northampton County’s resolution would also set aside \$175,000 earmarked for providing veterans and seniors with computers and wifi vouchers. These

programs would be offered through the county's veterans affairs office and area agency on aging, McClure said. The proposal depends on Northampton County Council approving a resolution authorizing the county to use the \$825,000 of its \$27.5 million CARES Act allocation. Congress passed the economic relief package to ease the fallout of the coronavirus crisis. Council will vote on the resolution at Thursday's 6:30 p.m. meeting.

Bethlehem Area School District Superintendent Joseph Roy plans on attending the meeting to lobby council to support the resolution. Up to 35% of students in his district do not have consistent access to the internet, he said. RCN and Service Electric agreed to provide free connections to needy families for the spring, and will offer low-cost packages of approximately \$15 a month when classes resume in the fall, Roy said. The county's plan would essentially guarantee all students can access the internet for their lessons, he said.

"Having RCN and Service Electric stepping up really helped to narrow the (internet) gap. We were pretty pleased with the percentage of connectivity we achieved with the spring," Roy said. "The question became 'What are we going to do going forward?' That's where this program comes in." The Bethlehem Area School District likely has one of the greater needs for the program within the county, but others could use the funding, too. Northampton Area School District Superintendent Joseph Kovalchik said the district began providing electronic devices to all its students about two years ago but about 5% — about 250 students — lacked internet access at home. The district had been able to arrange for cellular data access, but the connection wasn't strong enough for video instruction or the conference meetings like Zoom necessitated by the pandemic.

"We've been working with RCN and Blue Ridge and Service Electric trying to get some kind of free internet for those folks," Kovalchik said. "That \$100,000 could greatly affect in a positive way students' access to educational resources." In neighboring Lehigh County, Executive Phillips Armstrong said his administration intends to release a comprehensive plan for using more than \$33 million of CARES Act funding within the next month. That plan will include funding to assist students to connect to their remote lessons, he said. "We want to put together a master plan to make sure we're doing the best job possible," he said. — **Allentown Morning Call**

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The hopes of creating an independent citizens commission to draw Pennsylvania's political districts died with the departure of the state Legislature for summer break, but a Plan B proposal that would open the redistricting process to public view is one lawmakers should adopt. Fair Districts PA, a group of anti-gerrymandering advocates, spent more than two years organizing support for a citizens commission and getting dozens of state legislators to sign on as co-sponsors for amendments that could change the state constitution. The grassroots effort seemed to have a shot at succeeding, but in the end it met a fate often dealt to similar proposals in the Legislature — a blocking effort by Republican leaders opposed to the concept.

Since the effort to change who draws the maps has failed, the gerrymandering opponents have instead turned their attention to an equally important factor — how the districts are drawn. The power to redraw legislative districts would remain with a five-member commission made of Democratic and Republican leaders of the Legislature, with a chair picked by

the four or, if they can't agree, by the state Supreme Court. A bill introduced by Rep. Wendi Thomas, R-Bucks, would add something long absent from the process — transparency.

Her bill would require the commission to make available on a website the videos of commission meetings and the underlying data used to create proposed maps. Public hearings would be held before and after lawmakers finalize any plans. The proposal would also place a cap on how many times a county could be split among various districts, eliminating what many critics cite as the most outrageous examples of gerrymandering in the state.

These are modest proposals that allow the public — the people who put the legislators into office — the opportunity to view the process and exert pressure on those who might try to continue the decadeslong practice of the party in power attempting to reshape districts to its advantage. Gerrymandering has been the tool used by Democrats and Republicans through the years to produce districts they can control for their party.

Groups such as Fair Districts PA sprang up because of long-simmering voter outrage over the way districts were being drawn. The disregard for county and city boundaries was one of the problems the state Supreme Court cited in 2018 when it took the unprecedented step of overturning the state's congressional districts map and redrawing it. Ms. Thomas' bill was recently sent to the House State Government Committee. If the Legislature were to approve the bill before the end of January and Gov. Tom Wolf signs it, the new rules on the redistricting commission would be in place when the legislative and congressional maps are redrawn based on the results of the 2020 Census.

The redistricting process happens only once every 10 years. State lawmakers seemingly have retained authority to redraw district lines, but they owe their constituents a transparent look at the process and the opportunity to examine any proposals before a final vote is taken. — **Pittsburgh Post-Gazette editorial**



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