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Bloomberg
Free Cable for Firehouses Put at Risk by FCC Vote

Reuters

Cindy Bird is staring at her smart phone — annoyed. Again. "That circle — it just keeps spinning," she says. "I can't look up the weather...I can't look up anything. It's painful."

Bird lives in Mayberry Township, Montour County, and is one of those people: a have-not, one of hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians

who don't have access to high-speed internet service at their homes and businesses. It's a constant source of irritation for Bird, who has to jump through hoops to do the basics, like email a photo. Much to her dismay, she's become a master at hunting down hot spots while running errands or visiting family. "In this day and age, why can't we have broadband?" says Bird, whose husband, Rodney, is a township supervisor. "It's not like we live in the back woods — we're less than 3 miles from Elysburg."

Pat Fahringer, the township's parttime secretary, is one of the Birds' neighbors and says that filing state reports online from her home office — Mayberry doesn't have a municipal building — is a time-consuming task. She installed a satellite dish, hoping that would speed up the task. No such luck. "It's extremely slow. I can take a nap before a connection is made," an exasperated Fahringer says. "I tolerate it because I have to, but it's very frustrating."

It's no secret: Pennsylvania, like many other states, has a digital divide, a technological nuisance that separates the broadband haves from the have-nots. PSATS is among the organizations drawing attention to an issue that's having a serious impact on its members and their constituents, who either have slow service, or worse, no service. The situation is stunting economic growth, jeopardizing public safety, and putting students, small businesses, and even farmers at a disadvantage. "When you think about how far the internet reaches into our daily lives — we use it to communicate, shop, do business, and get news — it's unacceptable that there are still broadband have-nots,"

PSATS Executive Director Dave Sanko says. "People have chosen to live and work in rural townships because they value the lifestyle. They shouldn't have to pay more for internet service or accept substandard service — or no service at all — simply because they made that choice." A number of factors have contributed to the divide, including the commonwealth's remote and rustic terrains, which lack adequate communication infrastructure and enough paying customers to make expansion profitable for internet service providers (ISPs). The good news is, efforts to raise awareness about the broadband imbalance are leading to action.

Last year, Gov. Tom Wolf directed the newly created Office of Broadband Initiatives to provide coverage to every Pennsylvanian by 2022. "Broadband," the governor has said, "is as essential in today's society as electricity." Wolf has also been lobbying hard for Restore Pennsylvania, an infrastructure development initiative that would provide $4.5 billion over four years — borrowed against a severance tax on natural gas – to fund broadband expansion and other local projects. In addition, federal agencies are funneling billions into ground-breaking proposals that will bring reliable, highspeed service to rural counties here and elsewhere, says David Hoover, a policy adviser with the National Association of Towns and Townships, PSATS' sister organization in Washington, D.C. "I've never seen so much focus on an issue," he says, "as I'm seeing on getting broadband out to rural areas."

State Rep. Pam Snyder says it's about time. The Democrat, who represents Fayette, Greene, and Washington counties, has introduced several pieces of legislation over the past three years in partnership with now-Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill to help accelerate broadband

expansion statewide. Snyder's latest proposal, House Bill 350, which would require a thorough inventory of state communications assets for possible use in the high-speed internet build-out, is gaining traction. At press time, the measure had unanimously passed the House and was before the Senate. "This whole issue has been like pushing a boulder up a hill," she says, "but I will not stop until I see results."

In the midst of this activity, state and federal officials are trying to wrap their arms around the true depth of the digital divide to ensure that scarce funding is directed to areas with the greatest need. It's estimated that more than 21 million Americans don't have high-speed internet service. "It seems like it should be easy to figure out who has high-speed service and who doesn't, right?" says attorney Joel Winston of the Cohen Law Group in Pittsburgh. "But just answering that question is a massive technological undertaking."

And some, including a team of Penn State researchers, contend that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is relying on inaccurate maps and numbers to not only paint a flawed picture of the broadband problem nationwide but also distribute billions of dollars in funding and incentives to states and providers. NATaT's David Hoover says the association is among those lobbying for improved broadband mapping and that Congress is currently considering legislation that would also allow the public to challenge the accuracy of the FCC's maps. The FCC is also expected to vote on a proposal that would require broadband providers to report where they currently offer service. Right now, broadband providers tell the FCC where they could provide service, rather than where service already exists, which critics have said allows them to misrepresent the number of people with access — a key finding of the Penn State broadband study conducted here in Pennsylvania.

Researcher Sascha Meinrath and his team spent a year collecting data from more than 11 million tests to assess median broadband speeds in the commonwealth. Released in June and sponsored by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, the study indicates that high-speed internet access isn't as widespread as federal regulators previously claimed. Not a single Pennsylvania county meets the FCC definition of 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads. In addition, internet speeds are slower in rural areas than in urban regions.

The team also contends that the FCC's official estimate of broadband have-nots in Pennsylvania — reported to be around 800,000 — downplays the true state of the digital divide for the same reason that its maps have been called into question: The number is based on self-reported data from internet service providers. "There are huge swaths of the state without true access to broadband," Meinrath told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.* "A cross section of society...teachers, doctors, kids, small business owners... every constituency is detrimentally impacted by this. As soon as you leave the city core, it gets abysmal."

State Sen. Gene Yaw, who chairs the center's board, agrees: "The numbers are not good for Pennsylvania. We have a lot of work to do, and it's going to cost a lot of money." Since the report's release, Meinrath's team has delivered packages to every state lawmaker that included maps and data on their individual districts' broadband

connectivity. "This is one of those great areas where Republicans and Democrats agree," Meinrath told InsideSources. "Many say this is the top issue they hear from the constituency at the state level. I think there's real opportunity for meaningful intervention."

The **Broadband Cable Association of Pennsylvania (BCAP)**, however, disputes the PSU findings. Calling the study "misleading," BCAP Director of Communications Brian Herrmann says that, among other things, it doesn't account for consumers who have chosen not to purchase broadband service. He also questioned the accuracy of the researchers' speed tests, pointing out that BCAP's numbers indicate that 95 percent of Pennsylvania households have access to high-speed internet and, of that number, 99 percent have access to speeds exceeding the FCC's broadband standards. Cable companies, Herrmann adds, have invested $10 billion to improve and expand Pennsylvania's broadband network, and the work continues, including recent projects in Fayette and Somerset counties. "Unserved areas are our focus," he says, "and until we're at 100%, we won't be satisfied."

Regardless of whose numbers you believe, no one can deny that Sheri Collins, acting executive director of the Office of Broadband Initiatives, has been given quite a challenge. She has just three years to deliver high-speed internet service to every Pennsylvanian. Collins's biggest obstacle? Finding funding for the multi-million-dollar expansion. Her second biggest obstacle? Smoothing ruffled feathers. "Let me tell you, people are ticked off that they have been forgotten," Collins says, adding that she understands the frustration. "I can't imagine not being able to Google things to help my son with his math homework or to do research for school projects."

As she travels the state listening to concerns and drumming up support for the Restore PA funding, which she says is crucial to helping her office meet the 2022 deadline, Collins is also watching grassroots initiatives take root. Community leaders, residents, lawmakers, and service providers, she says, are coming together to launch innovative rural broadband solutions. The thinking is, if you build it, they will come. "Our office is already starting to see some early successes," Collins says.

In Bradford County, for example, which has some of the slowest internet speeds in the state, the county commissioners and the Central Bradford Progress Authority are implementing an $11 million, three-phase fiber installation project funded by Act 13 monies and grants. The first phase of the new broadband network, covering the area between Towanda and Troy, is already under way and expected to take a year to complete. "We're going to put what amounts to the backbone of a network in the county," Commissioner Chair Ed Bustin recently told a local reporter. "We're going to string three connected loops of fiber. It's meant to incentivize users to bring better broadband to rural areas. We don't have a guarantee that people will do that, but the economics of it make sense.

"We feel like we have a model that can work not just for Bradford County," he added, "but for rural Pennsylvania overall, and in fact, a national project." Meanwhile, the SEDA-Council of Governments, a regional development agency supporting 11 central Pennsylvania counties, is working on a pilot project that would open the door for internet service providers to install equipment on county-owned

emergency communications towers. The goal is to deliver broadband to residents in the COG's most rural areas: Juniata, Mifflin, and Perry counties.

"Having access to those towers is extremely valuable to ISPs," SEDA-COG Executive Director Bill Seigel says, "and we hope it creates some competition." At the same time, the organization recently received a $40,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission to study broadband accessibility in Clinton, Lycoming, Northumberland, and Union counties. Seigel hopes it leads to additional expansion projects. "For so long, everyone has been saying we need broadband," he says. "What we really need to do is get out, do some projects, and prove that it can work." Craig Eccher, president and CEO of the Tri-County Rural Electric Cooperative, agrees: "Our board has been looking toward the future of broadband and realizes that if we don't do it, no one will."

Within the last year, the Mansfield-based co-op has acquired $51 million in federal, state, and local grants to deliver high-speed internet access to an estimated 16,000 people in its seven-county territory over the next six years. Groundbreaking for the 3,250-mile fiber network is slated for this month. The co-op has served northcentral Pennsylvania since 1937. "This is a first for our co-op and the first for our state," Eccher says, adding that it's a proud moment. "It's making us feel relevant again. Today, electricity is expected, but this project is truly going to fulfill a need. I'm beginning to understand what it felt like for those folks who f irst brought electricity to these areas in the '30s. – *PA TownshipNews* **(Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors)**

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In her native Venezuela, Arianne Bracho had to be careful about the topics she broached on a community radio show she hosted. "That station's editorial line had to jive with the government's," Bracho said. "That made it harder to talk about certain topics."

That's not the case at PhillyCAM, her show's new home. The Philadelphia nonprofit is about to celebrate its 10th anniversary this fall. It runs one of the city's public access TV channels and a radio station — Bracho makes Spanish content for both platforms. Producers have free range on the topics they cover, from black sci-fi and spoken-word poetry to Haitians in Pennsylvania and indigenous issues in Latin America, she said.

But community media advocates warn that the structure that makes these culturally relevant shows possible is threatened by a proposed Federal Communications Commission rule that would change how PhillyCAM is funded. To operate in Philadelphia, Verizon and Comcast paid the city $22 million last year. That money went into the general fund, a portion of which goes to maintaining the public rights of way where cable companies install their wires. The fees cities charge cannot exceed 5% of a cable company's gross revenue. In addition to the fees, local governments have traditionally gotten public, education, and government (PEG) access channels at no extra cost.

In Philadelphia, Verizon and Comcast agreed to set aside up to 11 of these channels. Now, the FCC wants to allow cable companies to assign these channels a market value and to subtract the value from the fees paid to municipalities to maintain the streets. The case for changing the current structure? The FCC says municipalities are taking

advantage of a loophole. In a 2018 **fact-sheet** about the rule, the commission said municipalities "should not be permitted to make an end-run" around the 5% fee cap by also asking companies to "assume the costs of cable-related, in-kind contributions." PhillyCAM and 2,000 other channels across the country would be affected by the rule change.

If it takes effect, PhillyCAM executive director Gretjen Clausing said the city would be left with a choice: have fewer dollars in the general fund or kill the channels it gets from cable companies. "Knowing that there are a lot of financial constraints on the city budget, as much as they may support and believe in the importance of these local channels, they will probably be in the position of needing to take the money," Clausing said. Losing the channel would also make PhillyCAM ineligible for grants that come from "PEG" fees you see on your cable bill. For PhillyCAM, that amounts to about 70% of its operating budget, which pays for producer training. "Before the city can make any decision related to PEG channel operations, it would need to review and assess the final rule as adopted," said city spokesman Mike Dunn. The city joined dozens of other municipalities in submitting public comments to the FCC opposing the rule. It comes at a time when PhillyCAM is trying to better reflect the communities it serves. Three years ago, the station launched Spanish-language producer training, which is how Bracho got involved. That initiative has inspired a wave of new Spanish-language programming.

Now that Bracho doesn't have to worry about Venezuelan censorship, she likes to produce shows that can "inspire dialogue" in Philadelphia, even if it means wading into sensitive topics. One Friday, Bracho invited a community journalist to take listeners back to 2012, when the Canadian "SlutWalk" came to Quito, Ecuador. The marches took off across the globe after a **Toronto police officer** said women should "avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimized." Women marched in skimpy clothing to reclaim a word they said is used to blame victims of gender-based violence, a widespread problem in **Latin America**.

Bracho urged her listeners to keep an open mind about the show's use of the word. "It's a word that's obviously used to attack, but we're saying it on this show to demonstrate the weight of what's happening in the moment we're describing," Bracho told her listeners. Clemencia Rodriguez, a professor at Temple University who studies community media, said PhillyCAM plays a crucial role in a healthy media ecosystem, creating alternate paths for media makers who would otherwise have to bear the prohibitive costs of journalism school. The stories made by producers who live locally are also less like likely to paint whole swaths of neighborhoods with the same brush, according to Rodriguez. "They know how complex their communities are," she said of some that are typically covered because of poverty and crime. "But they also know the community is much more than that."

Equally important, Rodriguez said stations like PhillyCAM build media literacy in communities "and many times they go on to be community leaders," as echoed by producers like Bracho, who said the nonprofit offered her more than studio space. "Here, they form you … They give you the opportunity to develop so you could make community television or radio, but of a better quality," Bracho said. "That's important because it's not to make for the sake of making or speaking for the sake of speaking." "We're getting ready to celebrate our 10th

anniversary and feeling like we're just in this moment of kind of this critical mass of new producers and content that's being produced, and we're going to have the rug pulled out from beneath us," Clausing said.

Still, if the FCC adopts the rule change, PhillyCAM's doors wouldn't shut overnight. The city says it wouldn't make any decisions until it studied the final rule change. Clausing also believes the rule would be challenged in the courts, though PhillyCAM would still have to rethink its entire operation in the meantime. The FCC is expected to vote on the rule in a meeting Thursday in Washington, D.C. and a batch of PhillyCAM producers plan to attend. – *WHYY-TV/FM, Philadelphia*

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