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August 18, 2016

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Fierce Cable

Greene County resident Deborah Morgan pays nearly \$60 a month for supposed "high-speed" internet service that barely works, she told state legislators Wednesday. "We were promised high-speed internet from the get go," Morgan said during a state House Consumer Affairs Committee hearing at Waynesburg University. "It started out pretty good. It has degraded incredibly."

Morgan, a teacher who lives in Perry Township near the West Virginia border, said her average download speed with Windstream Communications is 1.7 megabits per second (Mbps) with the best access available between 3:30 a.m. and 7 a.m. Her plan to retire and start a home-based business like the one she had living in Washington, D.C., is threatened by unreliable internet service, Morgan said. "It's just wholly impossible to do business online with these kinds of speeds," she said.

After hearing stories from consumers such as Morgan, state Rep. Pam Snyder, D-Greene County, a committee member, requested the hearing so that legislators have an idea of what her county and other rural parts of the state face when it comes to internet services.

"I've just had so many complaints from people," Snyder said, adding that her daughters, who live on the family farm, could not use the Apple TVs she bought them because the service from Windstream was so bad. Eventually, her daughters switched to Atlantic Broadband like her "and now they don't have a problem," Snyder said.

Jefferson Township resident Kelly Kerskin, a library media specialist in the Jefferson-Morgan School District, said the best speed she can get from Windstream is 1 Mbps. Saying where she lives is "a rural, but far from remote, area," Kerskin recalled being surprised to learn that Windstream was her only option after moving to the area in June 2015. Kerskin said the slow Internet speeds have affected her ability to conduct work or do simple online tasks, and a phone call will boot her off the internet.

Trying to send an attachment, she said, involved "interminable buffering." State Rep. Rob Matzie, D-16, Ambridge, a committee member, said hearing Kerskin speak about getting kicked offline when a call came reminded him of the 1990s when dial-up internet service was the norm. "Today, in 2016, it brings pause because internet access is a necessity," Matzie said.

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Matzie said high-speed internet coverage is not an issue in his district or in Beaver



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County. "However, the testimony today about improvements in technology and how areas of the region and state have been left behind concerns me," he said. "My constituents could be in a similar situation moving forward as technology advances," Matzie said. With her company under the microscope, Jeanne Shearer, Windstream's regional vice president of government affairs, said the company meets Pennsylvania's minimum requirement of 1.544 Mbps and higher speeds can be accessed through a partnership with DISH Network.

A large portion of Greene County customers, 48 percent, have speeds of between 10 and 25 Mbps, she said. Consumers demand more speed, she said, but the more devices a home has, the slower speeds can get, Shearer told legislators. "Each device

is competing for bandwidth," she said. Brian Harman, a division vice president for Windstream, said his company broadband speeds can be affected by rural locations and distance from serving nodes as well as the number of users.

Windstream, Harman said, serves rural areas that other companies do not and that means outlying residents might not see the high-speed service they want. "That will impact the speeds by which you can download," he said. "Distance does play a factor." Andrew Place, a member of the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, lives on a Greene County farm and said he knows firsthand the connectivity issues residents face with cell phone coverage and internet service. "I understand. I get it. I live here, and I bring that voice to the PUC," Place said. "I hope this is the beginning of the conversation and not the end." – **Uniontown (Fayette Co.) Herald-Standard (Atlantic Broadband and BCAP provided testimony at yesterday's hearing. More in this afternoon's bcapsules.)**

AT&T Inc. on Wednesday introduced a new slate of wireless plans that raised prices for its most frugal customers, while lowering costs for its biggest data users. The

company's new mobile share advantage plan also will eliminate overage fees, opting instead to slow wireless speeds for customers who have topped their monthly data allowances. That move follows the model used by discounters T-Mobile US Inc. and Sprint Corp., which have dropped overage charges. Verizon Communications Inc. charges its subscribers **a fee to avoid such charges**.

"The carriers have all conceded that overage charges probably aren't the answer," said Craig Moffett, senior analyst at research firm MoffettNathanson. "Overage charges trigger calls into customer service, more unhappy customers and ultimately more churn." AT&T's price change, its first since last year, follows a similar step by rival Verizon, which raised prices in July for each of its plans while also increasing the data allowances. And it comes amid signs that the aggressive discounting the nation's biggest carriers have been using in recent years is slowing down.

Under the changes, AT&T's lowest-tier data plans now will cost \$10 more a month but offer more data. For instance, its cheapest plan will cost customers \$30 a month with one gigabyte of data, compared with \$20 a month for 300 megabytes of data previously. That contrasts with its bigger data plans for which prices have come down substantially. A 30-gigabyte plan now costs \$135 a month, down from \$225. And its new plan prices are now more comparable to Verizon's revised rates. AT&T also lowered some activation fees by charging most subscribers \$20 a month for having a smartphone connected to the system.

AT&T spokeswoman Emily Edmonds said customers of AT&T's most popular 15-gigabyte plan now will pay less. Customers also can keep their old plans if they wish. The new rates will be available on Aug. 21. Some U.S. wireless companies have **hinted at possible price increases** after years of rate cuts that have eaten into profits. But the expected release later this year of a new iPhone model from Apple Inc. could complicate that effort if wireless companies feel the need to offer deeper promotions to get customers to upgrade their handsets. – ***Wall Street Journal***

Charisse Lillie, who headed the Comcast Foundation and was the point person for organizations seeking donations or philanthropic help from Comcast Corp., is retiring in January after 12 years at the cable giant. Lillie, 64, served as a human-resources manager when Comcast rapidly expanded its workforce between 2005 and 2008. She is one of the company's top African American executives. "It's time for me to leave," Lillie said, adding, "I want to start a new chapter. I'm not exactly sure what the next chapter is, but I'm ready for a change."

David Cohen, Comcast senior executive vice president and former chairman of the law firm Ballard Spahr L.L.P., recruited Lillie from Ballard. She had been a partner and headed the law firm's litigation department. Her departure does not come as a surprise. In March, Comcast announced that it had hired Dalila Wilson-Scott from the New York bank JPMorgan Chase as senior vice president of community investment and president of the Comcast Foundation, replacing Lillie.

At the time of Wilson-Scott's hiring, Comcast said Lillie had assumed a new role as fellow and vice president of community investment. In recent years, the Comcast Foundation has focused its efforts on digital literacy through the Internet Essentials program and on youth leadership development and community service. The foundation is largely responsible for financing Comcast's annual day of community service, "Comcast Cares Day," typically held in the spring.

A native of Houston, Lillie studied law at Temple and Yale Universities. She said she may write a book about her career and experiences and guest-lecture at a university. She also may travel. – ***Philadelphia Inquirer***

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