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~ Harry S. Truman



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Protocol

Greene County is planning on significantly increasing broadband availability and capability in the county by the end of the year. Between \$1 million and \$1.6 million is going to be invested in the effort. It follows a feasibility study and

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Spotlight PA Surge in mail-in ballots could delay election results, so Wolf wants to change the rules

the availability of funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Expanding broadband has long been viewed as a way to give an economic shot of adrenaline to Greene and other largely-rural areas in Pennsylvania and across the country.

Greene County Commissioner Betsy McClure said in a news release, "Just like water, electricity and sewer services, we view internet access, speed and reliability of service an infrastructure requirement. It is required not only to serve our current residents and businesses, but also to provide opportunities for future growth and economic development in Greene County." The project is set to be completed by Dec. 30. Greene's commissioners are considering installing or upgrading services in and around Waynesburg, along with the communities of Brave, Rogersville and Graysville. The broadband upgrade will affect about 35% of the county.

Greene has also applied for \$5 million in additional funding for broadband improvements through the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program. A grant program administered by the state, it is designed to aid communities with a variety of projects, including economic improvements. McClure's fellow commissioner, Mike Belding, said the coronavirus and the increase in virtual learning and the use of telemedicine have underlined the need for broadband upgrades. He said it will "go a long way toward pulling Greene County into a future where internet availability and reliability is competitive with that of our neighboring counties." – ***Washington (PA) Observer-Reporter***

A day after the Bedford County commissioners approved a broadband expansion project that will offer internet service to some of the county's underserved areas, paid for by the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, the Bedford County Planning Commission reviewed the results of a study that would in the future bring expanded broadband service to virtually all areas of the county. "This is taking off. It will continue to take off," said planning director Donald Schwartz. If and when it comes to fruition, Schwartz said he expected it to be a "game-changer."

The eight-county Broad Band Task Force study, spearheaded by Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission, presents a highly detailed plan to greatly expand broadband service. It is, Schwartz stressed, a study. The first step, he said, would be the formation of a nonprofit "umbrella" that would oversee the implementation. The study proposes that Bedford County be divided into seven regions for a wireless phase. But the first step it proposes is three fiber pilot projects where the internet service providers would bear the cost of equipment and operations. The county's responsibility would be to maintain a contract to fix any breaks in the lines, which since the study calls for being underground, would be very rare.

The three pilot projects would consist of Hyndman, where a residential/business fiber to home network could be served by a nearby wireless tower; Hopewell, where a home/business network also would be served by a tower; and Hopewell to Saxton, where a relatively long fiber run would extend eight miles and connect the Hopewell fiber to Saxton. There is no timeline for the creation of the "umbrella" group, or the commencement of the pilot project, other than, as Schwartz said, "as soon as possible."

The study projects cost of the Hyndman project at just over \$170,000; for Hopewell at just under \$325,000; and the Saxton extension at over \$817,000. The Bedford County Commissioners on Tuesday approved a broadband expansion project that will expand internet service to some of the county's underserved areas. The \$184,000 proposal from Crowsnest Broadband of Woodbury will install broadband transmitters at six locations in the county. Dwayne Zimmerman, owner of Crowsnest, said the new service will be available to at least 800 to 900 customers by the end of the year, adding future updates could far exceed that capacity.

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

Editorial: Utility bills will come due

The commission took action to fill four vacancies on the nine-member board that arose from the death of one member and retirements of three others. The commission divides the county into nine areas, and it has generally been past policy that members should reside in the area that they represent. But Schwartz noted that while the commission received six total applications to fill the vacancies, two areas had no applicants. As a result, the commission voted to recommend to the commissioners that the vacancy in Area 5 (East Providence and West Providence townships and Everett Borough) be filled by Frank "Butch" Otto, an Area 5 resident, and Area 8 (Pavia, Kimmel, Lincoln, King, West St. Clair and East St. Clair townships) be filled by Jeff Dugan, an Area 8 resident. Both of those appointments would expire at the end of 2021.

A vacancy in Area 6 (Monroe, Southampton and Mann townships) would be filled by Christi Bonello, a longtime Southampton Township resident who now lives in Snake Spring Township. A vacancy in Area 9 (Bloomfield, Woodbury and South Woodbury townships and Woodbury Borough) would be filled by Lloyd Roach, a resident of Bedford Borough. Those appointments expire at the end of 2020. At that time, Schwartz said, applications from those who reside in the respective areas would be considered. The commissioners have the final say on all of the recommendations. — ***Bedford Gazette***

AT&T Inc. is taking a fresh look at its DirecTV business, according to people familiar with the matter, exploring a deal for a service wounded by cord-cutting. The telecom and media giant and its advisers at Goldman Sachs Group Inc. have been in talks with private-equity suitors about the satellite TV unit, some of the people said. Potential bidders include Apollo Global Management Inc., which had expressed interest last year, and Platinum Equity, these people said.

The process is at an early stage, and it's not clear what form any deal would take—or if there will be one at all. It is possible some of the suitors will team up or submit joint proposals. Other investors that were approached have decided not to pursue bids, some of the people said. AT&T executives have [previously explored parting with DirecTV assets](#), including a potential spinoff or combining assets with rival Dish Network Corp., but obstacles, including antitrust concerns, have gotten in the way.

A private-equity buyer could avoid those regulatory concerns. AT&T is looking to sell just over 50% of the asset, which would allow the telecom giant to take a fast-shrinking business off its books while still enjoying the benefits of a still-large distribution network, some of the people said. Any deal for the satellite TV service would be sizable but likely a far cry from [the \\$49 billion AT&T paid for it in 2015](#). The pay-TV unit has lost millions of subscribers in recent years as viewers switch to on-demand entertainment services like Netflix Inc. A deal could value the business below \$20 billion, some of the people said.

If a deal is reached, it would start to streamline a company that used [a series of acquisitions in the last decade](#) to shift from a phone-service provider into a media conglomerate. It also left the enlarged AT&T with a large debt load. The purchase of DirecTV made AT&T the biggest U.S. pay-TV provider, a title it later ceded to Comcast Corp. as satellite customers canceled. In 2018, [a roughly \\$80 billion takeover of Time Warner](#) added HBO, the Warner Bros. film studio and cable channels like CNN to AT&T's portfolio.

The latest deal talks were spurred by Chief Executive John Stankey, an AT&T veteran [who took over in July](#) from longtime boss Randall Stephenson, who remains chairman. Mr. Stankey has said the company should sharpen its focus on core connectivity services. Cellphone service and wired broadband remain AT&T's biggest profit engines and account for more than half of the company's over \$180 billion of annual revenue. Those telecom units have played a key role in stabilizing overall earnings this year as [the coronavirus pandemic](#) drained revenue in its satellite arm and in its WarnerMedia division. AT&T shares have missed out on the stock market's recent rally. The

shares are down more than 20% year-to-date, compared with a roughly 8% advance in the S&P 500 index.

The talks aren't certain to yield a sale, and the structure of any deal could result in AT&T retaining a stake in DirecTV. The Dallas company has tested market interest in several pieces of its empire only to decide to keep the units in-house. The company recently paused a sale process for its Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment videogame unit, according to a person familiar with the matter. Shedding a majority of the shrinking pay-TV business could offer a cash boost, while also triggering a costly write-down for AT&T. Cord-cutting has caused the most damage at AT&T, which lost 7 million U.S. video connections over the past two years. AT&T doesn't break out revenue or profits for DirecTV.

Executives say [the customer-loss trend is exacerbated by the pandemic](#). Many bars, hotels and airlines that use satellite feeds are operating at diminished capacity—if at all—sapping more of the unit's revenue. The company could still retain pay-TV customers if it decides to drop the satellite infrastructure. Executives earlier this year [launched a service called AT&T TV](#), which delivers DirecTV channels over the internet through a cable box that customers install themselves. "To the extent that we're able to get those customers engaged with us on those platforms, then we're in a good place, and we're OK with that," Mr. Stankey said in a July interview on CNBC. "And if that takes us down a path that says satellite delivery is less important, so be it."

AT&T also has joined the streaming fray by launching HBO Max in May. About 4.1 million people had activated the new service by the end of June. Earlier this month, WarnerMedia's new boss [ousted several executives](#), including the head of HBO Max. Apollo deal makers have long eyed DirecTV as a potential target. The firm last year pitched a three-way deal that would spin some of the division's hard assets into a new holding company controlled by Apollo, DirecTV and rival Dish, according to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. Whether Apollo's new proposal involves a similar structure couldn't be learned.

Dish Chairman Charlie Ergen has repeatedly called the union of the country's two major satellite-TV providers "inevitable," but AT&T executives have highlighted hurdles that would deter such a deal. Antitrust enforcers could block a deal to preserve competition in the market for live TV channels in rural areas, where satellites are often the only option available. Activist investor Elliott Management Corp. waged [a public campaign](#) last year challenging AT&T's shift toward media and calling on AT&T to consider asset sales. The [two sides ultimately reached a truce](#), with AT&T promising to conduct a strategic review of its portfolio and buy back more stock. Elliott later reduced its stake in the company.

AT&T also [pledged to continue trimming the debt](#) it amassed from acquiring DirecTV and Time Warner over the past five years. The company said it had about \$152 billion of net debt at the end of June after refinancing at "attractive rates." — **Wall Street Journal**

President Trump's campaign is flooding swing states with Facebook ads, urging people to request their ballots for November's election, despite his frequent and unfounded claims that voting by mail is riddled with fraud. According to Facebook's ad archive, the president is currently running [thousands of ads](#) on Facebook, with messages like "President Trump wants you to request your ballot," or, more succinctly, "Request your ballot." The ads, which don't explicitly mention voting by mail, have been viewed more than 1 million times by Facebook users in Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

The Facebook ads are running as [robocalls](#) featuring the president's son, Donald Trump Jr., have rolled out in 13 states calling absentee voting "a safe and secure way to guarantee your voice is heard." Both messages are a far cry

from the president's [claims](#) that "there is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent." This week, the FBI refuted those claims, [saying](#) they have "not seen to date a coordinated national voter fraud effort."

The ads aren't just about encouraging people to vote by mail. They also double as a data collection maneuver. Clicking through them leads to the Trump campaign's website, where people are asked to enter their address, date of birth, email and phone number, before being directed to resources where they can check their registration status, commit to vote or continue on to their state's board of elections. Generally, only first name, last name and date of birth are required to check registration status. President Trump's digital director, Gary Coby, did not immediately respond to Protocol's request for comment.

Facebook has recently undertaken its own voter turnout push, launching its Voter Information Center, which leads users to resources where they can sign up to vote by mail. Recently, the watchdog group Tech Transparency Project [accused](#) Facebook of bowing to the Trump campaign, after internal emails suggested the company scaled back its initial rollout of the Center over the July 4th weekend. Facebook's spokesperson Andy Stone told Protocol the emails were the result of a "miscommunication," but would not comment on whether the rollout was in fact scaled back.

Facebook introduced its ad archive after the 2016 election, amid concerns over so-called "dark ads," which referred to microtargeted digital ads that only a tiny fraction of the electorate would ever see. Some worried that politicians could send one palatable message to the public, then use targeted ads for more underhanded tactics like suppressing the vote. Amid threats of regulation, Facebook created the archive to shed more light on those dark ads.

In this set of ads, the Trump campaign is definitely broadcasting a different message than it has in public, only in this case, it's the public message that has people accusing the president of voter suppression. The Trump campaign has tried to distinguish in the past between absentee voting — which the president and his wife, Melania, plan to do — and universal mail-in voting. But the ads make no such distinction. Neither, it turns out, does the U.S. Postal Service. — ***Protocol***

Officials with Joe Biden's campaign announced Sunday that the Democratic presidential nominee will travel to southwestern Pennsylvania on Monday. Details with the exact time and location of where Mr. Biden will appear were not immediately disclosed in the campaign's press release Sunday.

Matt Hill, the Biden campaign's deputy national press secretary, tweeted Sunday that the former vice president is traveling to southwestern Pennsylvania on Monday "to lay out a core question voters face in this election: are you safe in Donald Trump's America? As Trump fan the flames of division, Biden will offer a different vision for a better future in Joe Biden's America." On Sunday night, President Donald Trump was quick to respond to Biden's scheduled visit. He tweeted that Mr. Biden "is coming out of the basement" and going to Pittsburgh. — ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***

Blind voters in Pennsylvania will be able to use a federally approved, cloud-based electronic platform to vote remotely in the November, and subsequent, elections.

The Pennsylvania Department of State will implement Democracy Live's OmniBallot tool in response to a state court's ruling that the previous paper ballot system used in the absentee and mail-in ballot process violated the Americans With Disabilities Act and Rehabilitation Act, according to a news release. "This is an important victory and a major step toward providing equal

access to the polls and fully accessible elections for all voters with disabilities,” said Kelly Darr, legal director for Disability Rights Pennsylvania. “The National Federation of the Blind and Disability Rights Pennsylvania will be monitoring the implementation of this new tool closely to ensure that disabled voters have the access and information necessary to use this tool in time for the general election.”

A lawsuit filed in May by Joseph Drenth and the National Federation of the Blind of Pennsylvania alleged the paper ballots used in the absentee and mail-in process did not allow blind voters to vote privately and independently in the same way other voters could because blind voters must rely on sighted third parties to assist with completing and returning a paper ballot.

Federation President Lynn Heitz said OmniBallot will give blind voters the freedom to vote completely by themselves. She and Drenth, the federation’s first vice president, are both legally blind. “I think that it is a really huge step for people who are blind or connect with some kind of visual impairment in Pennsylvania: the idea that there is a way to get your ballot and mark it electronically at home, especially during this time of covid-19,” Heitz said.

It is unclear how many registered voters are blind in Pennsylvania, but Heitz said there are 150,000 people with some form of visual impairment living in the state. The Department of State could not provide that information because that question is not asked on the voter registration form, a spokeswoman said. “In fact, we don’t have data on any type of disability,” spokeswoman Wanda Murren said Thursday. The new platform will allow county election officials to upload ballot information to create an accessible ballot, which can be electronically delivered and marked through OmniBallot by a link sent to eligible voters.

Darr said voters can mark their ballots electronically but will have to print them out and return them to the county. “A lot of the details of how this will work and when have not yet been released by the Department of State, so there are a lot of details that blind voters are going to want to know and we just don’t have those details yet,” Darr said. Murren could not provide details on the new system Thursday. “Things are still being developed,” she said in an email.

A court order approved in May required state officials to provide blind voters with an interim electronic option for mail-in voting in the June primary. For that election, the Department of State provided an accessible write-in ballot based on the federal write-in ballot that is available for overseas military voters, Darr said. According to Darr, both parties agreed the interim option was not a long-term solution, but it was “better than a paper ballot.”

Heitz chose to vote in-person in the primary election. When she went to her local polling place, she found that the voting machine wasn’t accessible. “It was a really good thing that I went because otherwise I would have found that out for the general election,” Heitz said. “Disability Rights Pennsylvania has actually filed a complaint regarding that, as well.” Additional issues with the previous system included the potential to be exposed to covid-19 while at the polls, or not knowing if a mail-in ballot was tampered with, Heitz said. “I don’t want to give the impression that people wouldn’t write on the ballot what somebody else asked them to write on the ballot, but there’s a lot to be said for being able to do this privately and independently,” Heitz said. “There’s always that chance.”

People could choose to simply not vote, but “We don’t want anybody to take this option,” Heitz said. Earlier this month, state officials told the court the state had finalized a contract with Democracy Live and intended to implement OmniBallot in the November and subsequent elections. County boards of election were going to be instructed to send appropriate instructions for marking and returning ballots to approved OmniBallot voters, the release said. “We were pleased the court granted our motion, recognizing that we were already planning to implement the accessible ballot marking device before the case was brought,” said Department of State Secretary Kathy Boockvar. “We

are looking forward to implementing this solution next month and providing another layer of accessibility for Pennsylvania voters with disabilities.” It will cost the state about \$572,000 to use OmniBallot in the November election, Murren said.

Democracy Live’s website says the tool has been used in more than 15 states and in nearly 1,000 elections over the past decade. The system generates a voter-verified paper ballot, and every voter has the option to print and mail their ballot. “OmniBallot is an accessible, electronic ballot transmission system hosted in a secure, federally approved cloud,” the website says. “The OmniBallot balloting portal delivers ADA-compliant, electronic ballots to voters remotely, no matter where they are or what device they are using. The system offers elections administrators the option of one-way electronic ballot delivery and two-way ballot delivery and electronic return.”

OmniBallot launched in 2009, and its cloud has been approved for use by federal agencies such as the FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense, the website says. Since its launch, the system has never been compromised, according to the website. – ***Pittsburgh Tribune-Review***

