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As Donald Pepe often does when something is brewing in the utility world, the Zelienople borough manager has been talking to his counterparts across the state and keeping an eye on what the big guys are doing.

Large public utilities are governed by the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, while Zelienople's electric utility and the other 34 borough electric utilities in the state are not. Still, they look to the PUC as a reference on best practices in running their smaller utilities, Mr. Pepe said. When the PUC ordered the large public utilities that it governs to stop shutting off non-paying customers because of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March, the vast majority of municipal utilities followed suit — Zelienople, with its 2,200 electric and water customers, included.

As the months wore on, Mr. Pepe and the rest of the little guys kept looking to Harrisburg to see when large utilities would be allowed to resume terminations. As Donald Pepe often does when something is brewing in the utility world, the Zelienople borough manager has been talking to his counterparts across the state and keeping an eye on what the big guys are doing.

So municipal utility managers talk among themselves and then they do what they think fits the unique needs of their systems. For some — although it's not clear how many — that means lifting the shutoff moratorium. Zelienople sent notice last week that it would resume shutting off customers who are behind on their bill payments, encouraging them to call the borough to set up a payment arrangement. It wasn't an easy decision, Mr. Pepe said.

The utility was nearing the end of its annual winter shutoff moratorium, which goes from late November until early April, when the COVID-related termination ban extended that reprieve by five extra months. As Mr. Pepe began to imagine what would happen if the COVID moratorium flowed into the next winter moratorium, he worried that customers who fall behind too much wouldn't be able to dig themselves out of the debt. "When these people come off the winter months, their bills are going to be astronomical," he thought. "It's not just us getting the money. It's making sure the customers don't get gobsmacked."

To date, Zelienople has 36 accounts eligible for termination, and 24 of them were delinquent prior to COVID-19, Mr. Pepe said. Data on municipal utilities and authorities is hard to come by without the PUC's rigorous documentation requirements. Mike Kyle, executive director of the Lancaster Area Sewer Authority, created a recent snapshot of where things stand for dozens of water and sewer authorities across the state. He fired off a quick questionnaire that he hoped would be a "historical data point" — a one-off survey to inform current thinking and to look back on.

Of the 50 responses, an overwhelming majority said they suspended terminations in early spring as the pandemic was just beginning its spread in Pennsylvania. Mr. Kyle's survey turned into a repeat enterprise — he has already done two follow-up polls and plans to continue the practice. The later surveys showed water authorities are resuming shutoffs.

The strain on the budgets of municipal utilities came through loud and clear in Mr. Kyle's surveys. "I absolutely know that there are revenue shortfalls across the board," he said, adding that he was surprised that most utilities hadn't yet adjusted their budgets to account for that. The deficits come from the money lost by waiving penalties and fees — something that large utilities had done, as well — and, for the most part, by losing a large chunk of commercial business during the statewide shutdowns in the early months of the pandemic. The subsequent decrease in business activity compounded matters. “Because we don’t pay dividends to stockholders or generate profit, authorities and municipal systems have less margin to weather the effect of non-payment,” said Matt Junker, a spokesman for the Municipal Authority of Westmoreland County, which resumed shutoffs on Aug. 15.

The authority “has a duty to the larger community to remain viable,” Mr. Junker wrote in a presentation he gave last week at an industry conference. The authority, which supplies water and wastewater to more than 120,000 customers across a five-county region, has terminated 80 customers for non-payment in the past few weeks. It reconnected 54 of them after they paid their balances in full or entered a payment plan. The number of delinquent accounts at the end of August this year was up only slightly over last year — less than 6%, Mr. Junker said. But the amounts owed on those accounts are nearly double the payments that were 30 days overdue this time last year, mirroring the trend among larger public utilities.

The agency expects that twice as many customers will seek payment arrangements this year, compared with last year. In Grove City, where the borough’s electric utility lifted the shutoff moratorium in mid-August, payment arrangements have a small-town flavor. A local church paid the utility bills for about a dozen customers in May, borough manager Vance Oakes said. The borough extended credit for two customers who have been hit by the pandemic. With 3,000 electric customers, Grove City lifted its shutoff moratorium on Aug. 15 expecting very little impact on its community. “We are fortunate that our residents seem to be in better circumstances than some other locations around Pennsylvania,” Mr. Oakes said. – ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***

According to a recent Gallup survey, more than 60 percent of Americans have been able to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic thanks to high-speed internet connections. Since 1996, U.S. broadband providers have invested nearly $2 trillion to connect our communities, incentivized by sound, pro-investment policies. This private investment has been well spent, providing most American consumers good value over some of the world’s best networks.

But there’s a problem: Our networks still don’t reach everyone, and private dollars alone won’t solve this challenge. Although America’s broadband networks have performed extremely well during the pandemic, it’s troubling that many rural and low-income families don’t have the internet access they need to work and learn. This disparity has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has laid bare the challenge of our longstanding digital divide.

The truth is that the “homework gap”—the inability of low-income or rural students to access online educational resources—has grown, particularly for students of color, students with disabilities and students in rural and under-resourced neighborhoods. Millions of American families cannot afford or may lack access to the high-speed internet connection they need to work and learn from home. According to Pew Research, 15 percent of U.S. households with school-age children do not have a high-speed internet connection; for households incomes below $30,000 a year, 35 percent don’t have high-speed internet.

Our country needs to close that gap, and now is the time for legislators and policymakers to act to ensure the educational and economic success of all Americans by making broadband connectivity more accessible, affordable and sustainable. Market forces and private companies can’t do it alone because of the lack of return on the significant investment necessary to reach all Americans. But it is in society’s interest for our government to financially incentivize the investments necessary to ensure that all children can learn, and all workers can do their jobs. Through a mix of public subsidies for low income households and smart policies that encourage new infrastructure investment in unserved areas, we can finally close this gap.

Here are four specific things Congress and the administration can do to meet the goal of bringing high-speed broadband to every American family:

– First, we need to identify where broadband is unavailable with geographic precision.To close the digital divide, we must know the contours of where the divide starts and ends. We need to telescope our broadband maps from the macro, census-block level to the micro, building level to understand with more precision where broadband is unavailable. The government's existing mapping methodology is past its shelf life. Currently, it does not identify the exact number and location of households that do not have meaningful broadband service, especially in rural areas. Congress recognized this in March by passing the Broadband DATA Act, which will create a more accurate and detailed map of broadband availability, helping companies like mine have the information needed to determine the focus and cost of deployment. The only problem is that Congress hasn't yet appropriated the funds for the more granular maps, although legislation is currently pending.

– Second, the Federal Communication Commission's program that supports connectivity for low-income households needs to be modernized.Called "Lifeline," the program began as a subsidy for phone service, not for high-speed internet. The program has been successful, but it's time to shift its focus to internet to foster equality and economic opportunity. Lifeline's funding structure also needs an update. The existing program is largely paid for by a narrow set of Americans, those who still rely primarily on voice phone services; these Americans see a 26.6 percent fee on their bills that seemingly grows quarterly. It is effectively a regressive tax on consumers, a policy that absurdly hurts those it is intended to help. Instead, Lifeline should be funded through direct congressional appropriations instead of the antiquated, inefficient and unsustainable excise tax on an ever-shrinking base of voice phone services.

Since the internet benefits all Americans, we should have a system that more broadly and fairly distributes responsibility for the subsidies, and ultimately lowers the financial impact per person to connect Americans. We should also provide beneficiaries of this program with the ability to receive benefits electronically and make digital payments in the same way USDA's SNAP card replaced food stamps. This would be a more efficient and secure approach to keeping low-income consumers connected.

– Third, as Congress debates earmarking up to $80 billion for rural broadband as part of the next round of pandemic relief, we should give equal weight to wired and wireless options.The FCC currently heavily weights subsidies toward gigabit speeds (fiber) over other technologies (such as fixed wireless). It is simply not practical or responsible to assume a fiber broadband service can be delivered to every unserved rural household—the prohibitive cost is part of why connecting many of these households has been uneconomical. Proposed solutions should also support wireless solutions, so long as they can meet defined performance criteria, and satellite may be required to reach the most remote locations.

Being overly prescriptive on the technology solution could result in some homes being permanently unserved. Policy, informed by practical engineering, can achieve all the economic and social benefits of gigabit technology at a fraction of the cost—something every taxpayer should want and expect.

– Lastly, Washington should enact a policy framework that incorporates sustainable funding mechanisms for the long run.As policymakers roll up their sleeves to modernize these programs and fund them through direct appropriations, they should not forget how we got as far as we have. Maintaining a regulatory approach that sustains continued private investment in deployment and upgrades is just as important as modernizing the patchwork of public sector programs. Industry investment provides stability in jobs and overall economic growth. Imposing unrelated and unnecessary regulations will make greater private sector investment less sustainable. Both public sector programs and private sector investment have their roles to play in bringing broadband to all Americans so our children can access remote education and provide our workforce with tools for today's economy.

Failure to act on such policies will serve only to further disenfranchise young Americans who already face precarious social, economic and familial situations, further delaying our journey to equality in justice and economic opportunity. Today's students are tomorrow's leaders. Supporting them through this current public health crisis—and beyond—is a social, business and economic imperative.

With so many students having to learn virtually this fall, and with so many workers now dependent on home internet connections to keep their jobs, now is the time for us to work together to ensure all American families have access to critical connectivity and the resources needed to meet the urgent challenges of today and tomorrow. If policymakers fail to act, today's "homework gap" will not only exacerbate the proverbial "generation gap," but we will have failed to bridge it. – ***Politico***

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