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# BCAP NewsClips

September 9, 2019

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Earlier this year, the Pennsylvania Turnpike dropped plans to install a statewide broadband system along the toll road with a private partner and lease excess space to private firms with communications needs because it couldn't reach a deal.

Now, the turnpike is moving on its own to install a fiber-optic communication system in the eastern part of the state to meet its internal needs. But the turnpike hasn't given up on the idea of generating revenue from the system and is designing it with extra space that it will solicit private operators to lease. The state turnpike commission last week approved a \$44.7 million contract with Black & Veatch Construction Inc. to install fiber-optic cable from the Harrisburg area to the Delaware Bridge. The commission also is awaiting bids for the same type of installation along the turnpike's Northeast Extension, said Wally Wimer, project manager and senior engineer at the turnpike.

The turnpike uses its internal communication system for telephone service, radio communications among offices and maintenance workers, financial information such as toll collections, traffic cameras, electronic road signs and the turnpike computer network. But that system is near its capacity, especially in the eastern part of the state. Although the rejected public-private partnership would have gone the length of the turnpike, the new system will begin in the eastern part of the state to accommodate the agency's switch to a cashless toll system, Mr. Wimer said.

In the east, the turnpike uses overhead gantries to record transponders from E-ZPass users or take photos of other customers' license plate to collect tolls where it has eliminated toll employees. The turnpike needs the additional fiber optic cable to receive and process the information from the gantries in its central offices. West of Harrisburg, for the most part, the turnpike is using existing toll booths to collect E-ZPass or license plate information, so it doesn't need the additional capacity as quickly. It will continue to use the existing microwave system in the western part of the state. Mr. Wimer said in the east, the contractors are expected to be designing and getting permits for the system through next year. Installation of the cable on the shoulder of the highway should begin in 2021. "We are installing additional fiber for additional use," Mr. Wimer said. "Then we will seek other users that might want to be on the system."

**Politico**  
**Senator**  
**'deeply**  
**disappointed'**  
**Zuckerberg**  
**declined to**  
**testify on**  
**extremism**

**Reuters**  
**Russia says**  
**Facebook,**  
**Google**  
**distributed**  
**political ads on**  
**election day**

**Ars Technica**  
**Mozilla is**  
**serious about**  
**privacy—and it**  
**wants you to**  
**be, too.**

**Pennlive**  
**This Pa.**  
**county is one**  
**of 10**  
**nationwide that**  
**could decide**  
**2020 election:**  
**Report**

The turnpike plans to use three of eight spaces available in the new system, but the other five will be available for other companies to use for their communications needs. Mr. Wimer said the turnpike will hire two consultants for the system, one to manage internal use and another to solicit additional users. "This is more of a 'build it and they will come' approach," said turnpike spokesman Carl DeFebo. The turnpike is trying to take advantage of leasing communications space as a new source of revenue. The goal would be to lease the extra space to major carriers such as Verizon or smaller groups such as local emergency services or service companies such as plumbers or electricians. The Illinois Tollway leases space on a limited basis and collects several million dollars a year from other users. "We'll have an abundance of fiber, so we'll see what we can do," Mr. Wimer said. — *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Students are sitting in school parking lots hours before and after school begins to complete homework. Farmers are relying on slow dial-up connections to complete transactions. These situations and more are the result of Pennsylvania's lack of high-speed broadband access, according to testimony at a public hearing this week at Penn State's Fayette campus.

The Federal Communications Commission estimated about 800,000 Pennsylvania residents don't have access to high-speed internet, said Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill, who chairs the Senate Communication and Technology Committee. But that number is likely in the millions because many connections don't meet the national standards for high speed internet, she said. Lack of broadband access is a problem for many industries, but the Senate hearing, the third of four, focused on education and agriculture.

Students in the commonwealth's K-12 schools and colleges often cannot complete online assignments due to the lack of access, a group of panelists testified. Rep. Ryan Warner, R-Lemont Furnace, said lack of access is not the only barrier. Broadband is expensive, and he considered cutting off his broadband service due to cost, he told the panel. He questioned education requirements for broadband. "Are we pushing, 'You have to have broadband' because it's the next phase of education before we are actually ready for the next phase of education?" Warner asked. "I don't think it's fair to the kids who don't have access or can't afford it." Gary Seelye, who is retired from the Brownsville Area Board of Directors, agreed that affordability was an issue. He said that 100 percent of students in his district are reimbursed for school lunches. But the digital divide needs to be addressed even if affordability is an issue, he said. "If we don't do something as a commonwealth to address this situation now, the commonwealth and our nation are going to have difficulty competing in this global market," Seelye said.

But there was some positive news – 100 percent of Pennsylvania's public schools have internet access that meets national standards, said Dr. Eric G. Rosendale, Executive Director of Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit #27. Only 35 schools are connected through cable or a wireless service. And the costs of internet access decreased 35 percent since 2015, he said in his testimony. Pennsylvania's agricultural community faces similar challenges due to a lack of broadband. Sixty-four percent of the state's farmers have internet access, compared to 75 percent of farmers nationally. But 39 percent of Pennsylvania's farmers still use slower dial-up options, while 30 percent have internet access through cable, according to information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

New technology means farmers need high-speed internet for more than just email and internet marketing, said Mark Critz, executive director of the Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Affairs/Rural Development Council and Western Regional Director for the state Department of Agriculture. "Tractors, drones, and robotic milkers are examples of equipment that provide efficiencies and innovation on the farm but rely on internet access; even animals and crops can be monitored by web-based applications and programs that require high-speed internet," Critz said. "The benefits of telemedicine extend to veterinary care but are not available to the very areas of the state that would most benefit because of insufficient broadband." Gov. Tom Wolf has made broadband access one of his top priorities. He established the Governor's Office of Broadband Initiatives in 2018 with a goal of extending access to all of the commonwealth. — *The Center Square*