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Millheim Borough (Centre Co.) residents could have reliable and accessible internet access within the next year, but only if six areas sign a nonexclusive franchise agreement by November.

Atlantic Broadband representatives Fran Bradley (BCAP Chairman) and Rich Fultz attended Tuesday's borough council meeting to discuss the feasibility of expanding and bringing cable, internet and phone services to the Penns Valley area. Although the goal of offering broadband services is achievable, residents voiced concern about a number of hurdles that could stand in the way — for starters, Millheim, Aaronsburg, Woodward, Rebersburg, Madisonburg and Coburn would all need to participate in the franchise agreement.

If every location agrees to enter the agreement, Fultz said the company will have an easier road to installing equipment and will benefit economically in the long run. But if one area drops out, Atlantic Broadband will have to reconsider its plans. The path the company is looking to build will run up state Route 45.

"This is all private capital by Atlantic Broadband. This is nothing that would be an expense on the borough. This is nothing that would be a legislative expense. Although if any of the legislators would be willing to help with the funding of it, we would greatly appreciate it," Bradley said, addressing Acting Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Broadband Initiatives Sheri Collins, who phoned into the meeting. Local and state officials attended the meeting, including Supervisor Keri Miller who asked if Gregg Township could be added to the deal.

"We don't want to overcommit to our bandwidth," Bradley said, adding that Gregg Township isn't immediately out of the running to be included in the expansion. Video, internet and phone services are packaged inside bandwidth. Although digital advancements have made compressing technology easier, Bradley said the company could risk over extending its services by adding too many locations. Borough Council meeting to discuss the feasibility of expanding and bringing cable, internet and phone services to the Penns Valley area. "When we bring the service into here, we're looking at this from an engineering standpoint that it's going to work," he said.

If the agreement moves forward, meaning every location enters into the franchise by November, Bradley said Atlantic Broadband could begin working to install equipment and provide service within a 12-month period. "Part of that process is that we're going to be building a whole new system," Bradley said. "Wherever the utilities are aerial, will be aerial. Wherever the utilities are underground, will be underground. We're not going to be coming in and digging up streets if there's an existing pole line that is there."

If underground work is required, Bradley said the company will abide by permitting processes put in place by each borough and township. Using the price points established in Mifflinburg, Bradley and Fultz said Atlantic Broadband would be able to offer different levels of cable service — limited, value and MoreTV. Video packages range from \$32.63 to \$92.14 and include potential add-ons. Fultz said Atlantic Broadband is upgrading its services in Mifflinburg, so prices are subject to change and will depend on what level of service and premium add-ons customers select. The company plans to offer both residential and business packages.

This is not the first time Atlantic Broadband has expressed interest in expanding to Penns Valley, said Millheim resident and former council member Leslie Warriner. "We were at this point before, probably six years ago, and I was the vice president of council at that point," she said. "I was in negotiations ... we were discussing the options, but Atlantic Broadband was interested in doing a community survey before any of this happened in order to put the infrastructure in."

With the current plan, Bradley said Atlantic Broadband is better equipped to take on this project, saying that it will be permitting its own poles to install technology, but challenges may still occur. "That can be a delay because we have to make applications ... to the phone companies and the power companies for every single pole that we will be attaching to," Bradley said. "And there has to be enough room on that pole for us to attach to, and if there isn't, then we have to pay the cost of having that pole replaced." The company is ranked as the eight largest broadband provider in the United States. Bradley said it offers services in 11 different states from Maine to Florida, focusing on rural areas. In Pennsylvania, Atlantic Broadband has equipment installed in 17 different counties throughout 250 municipalities.

**Washington
Post**

**Op-ed by
former PA
Gov. Ed
Rendell**

**(D): I like
Elizabeth
Warren. Too
bad she's a
hypocrite.**

Bradley and Fultz said the company is not concerned with the number of Penns Valley residents who will become Atlantic Broadband customers, assuming demand won't be low. But, Fultz said providing broadband services to every Millheim resident may be possible but could come with additional fees. "To say that we're going to cover everybody in the township, I would say probably not," Fultz said. "It's not that everything is out of the question. We're looking to get the majority of these towns covered." Representatives from Centre WISP were present at Tuesday's meeting. After winning a bid earlier this year, Centre WISP has **installed broadband equipment throughout the county**, but Bradley said Atlantic Broadband welcomes the competition. Atlantic Broadband is still working to contact other areas to discuss the franchise agreement plan. If one location decides against entering into the deal, the 12-month timeline could change. – **Centre Daily Times (State College)**

As the Federal Communications Commission tees up \$20 billion in funding to build out broadband in the next decade, the government's underlying method of directing that money remains "frustratingly inconsistent and unreliable," the head of an organization of rural independent telecom companies told a congressional panel on Wednesday. The comments — made by Shirley Bloomfield, CEO of NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association — were echoed by five other telecom industry officials and advocates who urged lawmakers to reform the FCC's data collection requirements to improve the accuracy of maps showing which areas still lack broadband. That task has been taken up by Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Forest Hills, a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and chair of its Subcommittee on Communications and Technology. Mr. Doyle called Wednesday's hearing before the subcommittee to hear from experts on **a package of five bills** that aim to address a long-standing problem of reaching the 21 million people without broadband access. "Accurate maps of who does and who doesn't have access to broadband are a critical first step in closing the digital divide," Mr. Doyle said. "We can't hope to solve this problem if we don't know the scope of the problem are where to put our resources."

Put together, the bills would require the FCC to collect and disseminate far more granular broadband data, allow the commission to use crowdsourced feedback on coverage areas and establish a new office to serve as central command center for mapping efforts. They would also make it illegal to knowingly file false broadband information and create a system by which private and public entities could challenge data submitted to the commission. The FCC did not respond to a request for comment on Wednesday, but it has taken steps to improve its maps. In August, the five-member commission voted unanimously to dole out more than \$20 billion of Universal Service Fund subsidies over the next 10 years as part of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. The commission also approved a proposal aimed at better collecting information from broadband providers to improve its coverage maps. Broadband providers will have to report broadband access data in the shapefile format, which is a geospatial format widely used in geographic information system, or GIS, software.

Currently, the FCC asks providers to report coverage information that fits into Census-derived blocks — areas that can range from a city block to a sweeping area of rural farmland. By that system, an entire Census block could be classified as served by broadband even if only one household has access. Discussion of the new file format consumed much of the hearing that lasted more than two hours. "Shapefiles will allow network providers to draw boundaries around their service areas based on what they know — based on the places they are, the places their lines run, the place they offer service," said James Assey, executive vice president of NCTA-The Internet and Television Association. (Though it has a similar name, the group is unrelated to the rural broadband association.) "I think being able to rely on a provider to draw the boundaries of where it can serve will lead to more accurate results," he said.

Mr. Assey added that Congress should craft data requests as precisely as possible, because extraneous requests "would only muddy the waters, increase costs and could delay funding to underserved areas." "The FCC already collects a wealth of data from broadband providers," Mr. Assey said. Ms. Bloomfield, of the rural broadband association, said she supports allowing members of the public to view and challenge the quality of the reporting. Even with better reporting, crowdsourcing could be a way to address gaps. "If the carrier is reporting something, what we want to know is, on the ground, is that what's happening?" Ms. Bloomfield said. "You can allow consumers on the ground to give some feedback." The five bills have been referred to the Committee on Energy and Commerce. All the lawmakers on the subcommittee expressed confidence on Wednesday the bills can become law. Last year, a Penn State University researcher argued the **FCC maps greatly understated** the number of Pennsylvania households at 800,000 without broadband access. The digital divide is "going to hit Pennsylvania like a tsunami," said the researcher, Sascha Meinrath, at a conference Downtown. – **Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

Federal regulators have ordered Google to assure employees they are allowed to speak out on political and workplace issues, people familiar with the matter say, as part of a settlement of formal complaints that the search giant punishes those who do just that. The move from the National Labor Relations Board offers Google an escape hatch from a thorny issue that has roiled the business in recent years. Though Google executives have long bragged about having a workplace culture designed to encourage open debate, current and former employees across the political spectrum have complained that they were retaliated against for raising concerns about equality and freedom of speech. The settlement was approved by an agency director this week, according to a document. It is slated to go into effect after an appeals period. The NLRB action is the second formal reminder to Google in a week to stay within the law. Last week, Google's YouTube unit **settled an investigation** into alleged violations of child-privacy law with a \$170 million fine and an admonishment from regulators not to track the internet activity of children under age 13.

Google, a unit of Alphabet Inc., also is in the early days of **separate investigations** from the Justice Department and a group of attorneys general representing nearly every state into its dominant online advertising platform. Private employers have the ability to limit certain speech inside their workplaces, and late last month Google moved to **prune office debates among** its more than 100,000 full-time employees, adding new guardrails for discussions of nonwork topics and encouragement to avoid potentially disruptive conversations. Among the new rules: "Discussions that make other Googlers feel like they don't belong have no place here."

Federal law protects activity like forming a union and conversations about improving pay, among other types of conduct. Still, current and former employees have said Google has overreached, or at times not done enough to protect their speech inside the workplace. The NLRB in its settlement orders Google to actively notify employees that the search giant killed rules to clamp down on employees sharing confidential information with one another, or with the media. Right-leaning employees say that expressing their beliefs can make them lepers among Google hiring managers, while left-leaning staff have been stymied in attempts to protest YouTube's evolving policies on hate speech, among other issues. Some of the more outspoken staffers were later offered pay packages to leave the company, these staffers say. The NLRB's settlement comes in response to a pair of complaints about Google's reaction to workplace dissent.

One complainant, ex-Google engineer Kevin Cernekee, has said he was fired for expressing unpopular right-leaning political beliefs to fellow employees on the company's freewheeling internal message boards. Google says he was fired for misusing company equipment. President Trump tweeted support for Mr. Cernekee after The Wall Street Journal wrote **about the former employee's allegations of bias** last month. Google declined to comment this week on the NLRB action or Mr. Cernekee's case. The other complainant is a current Google employee whose identity remains private. He alleges he was punished for posting unflattering opinions about a high-level Google executive on a Facebook page. The NLRB's settlement is a victory for Google inasmuch as it doesn't make a formal determination about whether Google was in the wrong. Mr. Cernekee had asked to be reinstated, with back pay; he will receive neither under the settlement terms.

Instead, the NLRB is ordering Google to inform current employees that they are free to speak to the media and others about working conditions, wages and the like, regardless of whether Google views such topics as inappropriate for the workplace. The NLRB is also ordering Google to withdraw Mr. Cernekee's final warning letter, which said he had violated the "Respect Each Other" section of the company's code of conduct in five comments to message boards. Attorneys for Mr. Cernekee and the second complainant have objected in writing to the settlement, saying they deserve a hearing to air their views. — **Wall Street Journal**