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Westmoreland County to spend \$10 million for broadband expansion



RICH CHOLODOFSKY | Thursday, July 13, 2023 9:01 a.m.



TRIBUNE-REVIEW

A woman works on the computer at the Adams Memorial Library in Latrobe in this 2020 file photo.

Westmoreland County leaders are expected to allocate more than \$10 million in covid relief funds this year to expand broadband to residents currently unable to receive reliable high-speed internet service.

Commissioners on Thursday are expected to approve a \$1.7 million contract with Verizon Pennsylvania LLC to install about 30 miles of fiber optic cable as part of four county projects in Derry, Fairfield and Ligonier townships.

Officials said that Verizon will install broadband to about 400 homes and businesses in four separate projects. Those projects were formulated in response to a survey conducted last year that found about 3,500 locations throughout the county were unserved by high-speed internet.

The county's financial commitment represents about half of the project's \$3.5 million price tag, said Jason Rigone, county planning director.

Meanwhile, the commissioners said they also will vote to back resolutions to support and pledge to allocate funds for additional private proposals from internet providers to install multiple clusters of broadband service throughout the county.

Funding would be allocated from the county's \$105.4 million federal grant for COVID-19 pandemic relief efforts and cover about 20% of project's costs, commissioners said.

Rigone said those proposals — if approved this year by the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority — will provide internet service to as many as 2,000 residents.

Projects include installation of broadband infrastructure to about 1,000 to 1,200 locations north of Route 30 and another 800 locations south of Route 30.

The proposed projects include dozens of small clusters of locations earmarked for broadband installation.

"If approved, a significant amount of our unserved locations will be addressed," Rigone said. "We're making progress to complete our mission."

The commissioners said county financing could total up to \$9 million as part of a partnership with the private providers, which include DQE Communications; All Points Broadband Partners; and Comcast Cable Communications.

Rigone said those private proposals call for about \$41 million in public and private spending.


"This is a way to help attract people to the county, especially remote workers where there are issues with broadband service," Commissioner Doug Chew said.

The county's project with Verizon is expected to begin this year and be completed next year.

The private proposals, if approved by the state, could begin next year, Rigone said.

"Broadband is obviously needed in Westmoreland County," Commissioner Sean Kertes said. "We want to invest in Westmoreland County, and broadband is one of the steps we have to take."

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