

TCRPC

Planning Toolkit Fact Sheet

Rural Broadband

INTRODUCTION

“The internet has often been called the information superhighway. If all Americans are to have access to the internet, the answer is to step up and pay the necessary capital cost - just like we pay for the capital cost of building a physical highway.” One thing the COVID-19 pandemic pointed out was the internet was not simply a luxury, it became to be viewed as a necessity.

Broadband is a form of telecommunications. Rural broadband is the pursuit to provide coverage to areas passed by the cellular telecommunications industry. It provides communications advancements to surpass previously acceptable communications speeds brought about by now antiquated dial-up connections. While the main population centers of our region were quick to see broadband deployment, many outlying areas are still to this day devoid of any broadband service either through cable or any wireless network.

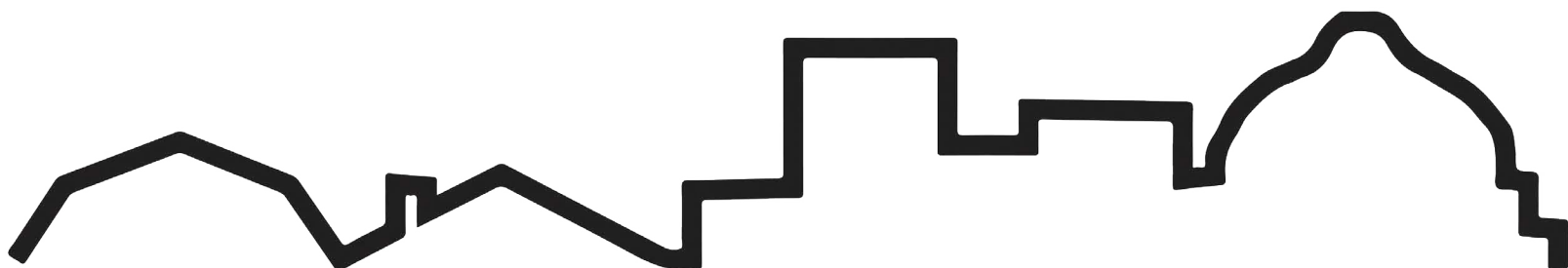
While broadband service has been slow to arrive in Pennsylvania it has seen recent momentum after seeing how educators and school districts were forced to try and fit remote learning into areas that were not prepared to accommodate such advanced capabilities. The Governor launched the Commonwealth’s broadband initiative in 2018. A focus committee was assembled on what up until that time had been essentially left up to the tower companies and telecommunication providers.

There are several ways broadband communications may be delivered to service consumers. One way is through mobile of cellular service. A TV coaxial cable may double to provide both TV (cable) service and internet connection. Also today, an overarching option is available via satellite service.

¹ The Brookings Institute 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/5-steps-to-get-the-internet-to-all-americans/>

BENEFITS

- Remote education and learning opportunities for both public and private schools at all educational levels
- Improved safety and security; research, business management, operations and sales
- The efficient delivery of healthcare service
- Remote work possibilities (reducing highway vehicle trips, reduced air pollution, and the sharing of knowledge)
- Opportunities for the public to save money with increased competition for services to areas where there is overlapping coverage



DRAWBACKS

- Broadband service to underserved areas would largely go unmet if left to potential service providers, as their business models typically don't reflect sufficient cost-benefit to make it worth the investment
- The availability of accurate coverage data has limited the ability to fully understand where holes in broadband service truly exist. Accessibility to this information has been improving, as there has been a greater willingness of the service providers to share better coverage data
- The topography common in southcentral Pennsylvania greatly complicates the ability of providers to make broadband service available to many areas in a cost-effective manner. Once implemented, post project coverage can still remain spotty
- Long-term maintenance responsibilities of all facilities should be considered. Maintenance can be split between private providers and municipal governments
- Greater broadband availability is likely to lead to more people working at home, an issue that should be addressed in local ordinances
- Rural broadband access increases the ability to shop on-line, therefore reducing the need for reliance on local markets which can hurt the local economy. Also, freight traffic increases with the increase in online shopping
- Changing technologies for the provision of broadband service requires municipalities to stay up to date on the management of the service

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Identify areas with limited service (This may require a localized study if the area of concern has not already been included in a broader area wide study)
- Offset private communications investment funding where it has been lagging by seeking funding opportunities (grants, redirecting recovery funding, pooling community investment, etc...)
- Incentivize service provider projects to make it worth their commitment (time, installation and long-term maintenance)

RESOURCES

- **One Web Satellite Internet Company**
- **Starlink**
- **PA DCED's Unserved High-Speed Broadband Funding Program (UHSB)**
- **American Rescue Plan Act of 2021**
- **Future Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act**
- **Sample RFP**
- **Sample tower and ground lease agreement**
- **Sample facilities lease agreement**

