

Pennsylvania Puts Up Millions to Expand Rural Internet

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(TNS) — Gov. Tom Wolf said Monday that Pennsylvania would be offering up to \$35 million to providers to entice them to bid on bringing high-speed internet to areas that are underserved or lack service altogether.

Wolf also announced the creation of the Office of Broadband Initiatives, which will oversee developing and executing a statewide strategy to expand internet access to all of Pennsylvania by the end of 2022.

In making his announcement in Harrisburg, Wolf cited statistics showing that 800,000 Pennsylvanians, including 520,000 in rural areas and 250,000 in urban areas, lack access to high-speed internet, consequently hurting the state's efforts to grow the economy, expand education opportunities and increase access to telemedicine services.

"For Pennsylvania to succeed, we must close that digital divide," Wolf said.

The money to provide incentives to providers will come from PennDOT through its fund to build a network along its highways to accommodate coming technology such as autonomous vehicles and other digital transportation needs.

"It's an investment that we would have to make anyway," said PennDOT Secretary Leslie Richards.

Bidding on providing services will be part of the Federal Communications Commission's Connect American Fund Phase II Auction, a \$2 billion program to expand broadband services to the nation's underserved areas.

The auction begins in July, Wolf's office said in a statement.

Wolf also said Pennsylvania ranks 27th among states for making broadband available and 43rd in one study among states for investing in expanding services. "Today, we're going to change that," he said.

State Rep. Pam Snyder, D-Greene County, has been working on expanding high-speed access to rural areas in Pennsylvania for several years, including bills with state Rep. Kristin Phillips-Hill, R-York County, to increase access to broadband services for those residents.

"I'm glad to see the governor recognize the importance of this issue, which I have been diligently fighting for on behalf of rural Pennsylvanians," Snyder said in a statement. "I've been committed to making sure rural areas aren't left behind or stranded on the technology highway."

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