



**‘There is just
not service’:
COVID-19
pandemic
spurs internet
expansion
efforts in**

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As schools in the region shut down a year ago with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stephanie A. Keebler worried about how teachers would reach students with lessons.



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Source: Esri Post-Gazette

Ms. Keebler, superintendent of the Titusville Area School District in Crawford County, polled families and found that a quarter of the district's 2,100 students did not have reliable internet access in an educational system covering 200 square

students at two of
the district's
elementary schools.

“When you look at
internet access for
education, health
care, and, frankly,
for everyday use, it
becomes a basic skill
you should have
access to,” she said.

“We have families
who absolutely can
afford it and can't
get it. There's just
not service.”

Last year's
lockdowns added
urgency to expand
broadband access in
rural Pennsylvania,
including Titusville,
about 100 miles
north of Pittsburgh.



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every American to
the internet over the
next eight years
could speed up those
plans while creating
new sources of
funding.

“We recognize the
economic and social
issues around
broadband access,”
said Zachary
Norwood, planning
director at the
Crawford County
Planning
Commission, which
has been leading the
broadband
expansion effort.

“The pandemic sort
of kicked it into high
gear.”

School and business



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digital divide that marks much of rural Pennsylvania, where internet speeds are often slow when the service is available at all. Portable hot spots have been used by school districts and others to create access in remote areas, but with mixed results.

“The pandemic really shined a light on the whole problem,” said Zachery Lee, regional planner at the Altoona-based Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission, which is trying to bring broadband access to



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In September, the commission created the nonprofit Alleghenies Broadband Inc. to drive the effort while extending service to about 4,000 residents in parts of Somerset and Huntingdon counties while seeking grant funding to expand online access in Bedford County.

Like Southern Alleghenies, Crawford County's plans began well before Mr. Biden was elected. By June, the Crawford County Planning Commission is



access to the county commissioners for review. If adopted, a public-private partnership would extend service to more than 9,700 households, or about 28.3% of the total homes in Crawford County.

Only about 75% of the county has access to the internet at the federally defined minimum speed, according to a Penn State University study. But the initiative would boost speedy access to 95% of the county, including 21 schools, three airports and nine volunteer fire



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which has joined in the effort with private internet service providers, schools and local businesses, would use fiber optic cable, transmission towers and wireless transmitters, sometimes placed atop silos and barns, to extend service. A final cost estimate is still being worked out, said Ron Mattocks, who owns a marketing company and chairs the planning commission's broadband committee.

“Limited connectivity literally



Mr. Maddocks said.

“It puts people at a real disadvantage” and hurts businesses by making them less competitive.

Speedy internet can have a big impact on economic development, according to a study by the University of Tennessee, which looked at the financial impact of fiber broadband access on the city of Chattanooga. The study found that the city realized a \$2.7 billion economic boost between 2011 and 2020 as the result of the installation.



broadband because of my ZIP code,” said Gary Bolton, president and CEO of Fiber Broadband Association, a trade group based in Washington, D.C. “I think this is exactly what rural Pennsylvania is looking for.”

Mr. Biden’s vision for extending broadband service in the U.S., including to some 30 million people who live in areas with slow or no service, may be found in legislation introduced to Congress in March. It earmarks \$80 billion for



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broadband adoption;” and \$2 billion to enable students without internet at home to participate in remote learning.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn, D-S.C., are sponsors of the Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act.

If the bill becomes law — and it still faces an uphill battle in Congress — it could push the U.S. closer to universal internet access, according to Sasha Meinrath, who holds



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University.

“There’s still a lot to be disclosed before we’ll really know if this is a great plan or not,” Mr. Meinrath said. “But making the issue a priority is a great leap forward. It’s not going to get us there, but it’ll be a big shift forward in

