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Poor internet service a deterrent to rural living, survey finds

by Jason Nark, Posted: October 29, 2020

PA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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When the COVID-19 pandemic settled in for the long haul, and people were no longer tethered to an office building, or even a town, some of them looked to the hills.

Manhattan, where space is scarce and rents high, saw its highest number of available units in over a decade this summer. Real estate agents in rural Pennsylvania told The Inquirer their phones were ringing nonstop from people wanting to move to less densely populated areas.

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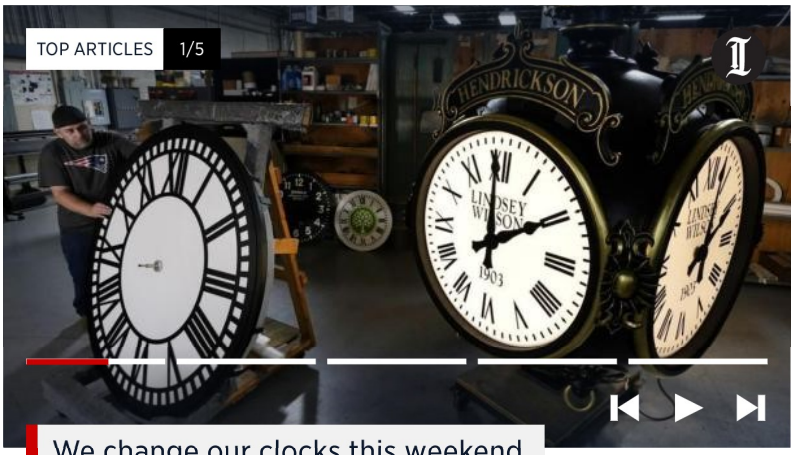
Some were just looking for a getaway.

"Our address would stay the same," one Philly resident told The Inquirer in May, "but we would spend more than half our time in a rural setting."



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One recent national study, however, found that poor internet service remains a big drawback for people considering moving to rural areas. In a survey conducted by Satellite Internet, a research group that promotes internet use via satellites, 36% of respondents said it was preventing them from relocating there. A majority — 67% — said internet service would affect their decision to move somewhere more rural.

Pennsylvania's internet service has long been a headache and nuisance for rural residents. A 2018 Penn State study found speeds were even slower than previously thought, particularly in counties like Sullivan and Wyoming. Streaming a movie on Netflix was nearly impossible.

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During the pandemic, Pennsylvania's rural internet woes have become more critical, as many school districts can't implement online learning and residents can't work from home.

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"Internet is something that used to be considered a luxury," said State Sen. Pat Stefano (R., Fayette), "and it's now a utility."

Stefano said a recent Senate bill could modernize public utility codes, allowing for internet service providers to use infrastructure previously reserved for land-based telephone lines. A House bill on Gov. Tom Wolf's desk will also address outdated delivery issues, such as easements on electric lines that prevent them from being used for communications such as internet service.

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Fixing the problem might be Pennsylvania's most bipartisan issue, said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Clint Owlett (R., Bradford, Tioga, Potter).

"If there's anything we can all stand around the campfire and sing kumbaya on," he said, "it's rural broadband."

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