

PA Needs Another ‘Shot in the Arm’ with Broadband Access Expansion

***Editor:** Please consider publishing the following op-ed. For more information, contact Ginni Linn, PSATS Director of Communications, at (717) 763-0930 or glinn@psats.org. **Note:** A copy of this op-ed and a photo of David M. Sanko are posted on www.psats.org. Click on “Newsroom” in the horizontal bar across the page and then “News Releases & Op-Eds.”*

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An Op-Ed

by David M. Sanko

Executive Director, Pa. State Association of Township Supervisors

Pennsylvania, like many other states, has a digital divide that separates the haves from the have-nots. And at no other time has this divide seemed wider than in the last year when the COVID pandemic brought the demand for internet service into sharp focus. From students trying to do their lessons remotely to small businesses trying to survive and residents depending on telemedicine while confined to their homes, the lack of broadband service is holding people back all over Pennsylvania, but especially in less populated communities.

PSATS is among the organizations drawing attention to this issue for several years now. It is having a serious impact on its members and their constituents, who either have slow service, or worse, no service at all. The situation is stunting economic growth, jeopardizing public safety, and putting students, small businesses, and even farmers at a disadvantage.

Sen. Gene Yaw, chairman of the board for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, says the numbers are not good for Pennsylvania, there’s a lot of work to do, and it’s going to cost a lot of money. The center has studied the broadband issue for several years and released eye-opening reports that there are huge swaths of the state without access to

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broadband. In every Pennsylvania county, half the population lacks adequate broadband service, the center says.

When you think about how far the internet reaches into our daily lives – we use it to communicate, shop, do business, and get news – it's unacceptable that there are still broadband have-nots. People have chosen to live and work in communities where they value the lifestyle. They shouldn't have to pay more for internet service or accept substandard service – or no service at all – simply because they made a choice to enjoy Penn's woods' less populated areas.

Many of our township officials are also suffering from no or slow service, which hampers their ability to do their jobs, such as filing reports with the state, many of which the state requires to be filed online. While townships that have broadband service can file these reports with ease or handle all their permitting, parks and rec, and many other transactions online, those without broadband are left in the dust to wait for service to arrive one day. This is just as unacceptable today as the lack of running water, sewage, and electricity was decades ago.

This is the 21st century, and it's time for action to accelerate broadband expansion statewide and ensure that funding is directed to areas with the greatest need. While the commonwealth has been working on various proposals to make progress on this hefty lift, a good bit of action is happening at the local level through grassroots initiatives by local officials taking the bull by the horn on their own. And now, new federal funding (from the American Rescue Plan) that could be used for broadband expansion may just be another shot in the arm we need.

Community leaders, residents, lawmakers, and service providers are coming together to launch innovative broadband solutions. It's been said before, “If you build it, they will come.” From a three-phase fiber installation project in Bradford County to a SEDA-COG project in

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central Pennsylvania and the Tri-County Rural Electric Cooperative fiber network under way in northcentral Pennsylvania, the state’s have-nots are now becoming haves.

The examples of broadband innovation are all over Pennsylvania. There’s a lot of work to be done yet, but it’s local determination like this that will make the difference in the long run.

The need is great. Everyone, no matter where they live in Pennsylvania, deserves this most vital, essential service. The future of Pennsylvania’s families depends on it. It’s time to stop talking the talk and begin walking the walk now that we have this once-in-a-lifetime funding opportunity.

About the author: David M. Sanko is the executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. With a broad background in local and state government, Sanko oversees an organization that is the primary advocate for the commonwealth’s 1,454 townships of the second class, home to 5.5 million Pennsylvanians.