

Valley broadband expansion project nears final design

By **Eric Scicchitano**
escicchitano@dailyitem.com

Five counties committed \$3.2 million to extend wireless broadband internet coverage to areas across the Valley with connectivity that's currently spotty at best.

The final design is nearly complete on the expansion of a pilot network already in place in Montour County.

Satellite dishes will be placed at as many as 20 sites to relay internet service point-to-point in rural areas of Columbia, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties. Existing towers, tall buildings and farm silos stretching above tree lines are targeted for satellite installation. Internet service providers operating on the network would then offer consumer service to residents and business owners.

There are five such satellite sites already in place in Montour County, according to Jennifer Wakeman, executive director of the economic development organization DRIVE — Driving Real Innovation for a Vibrant Economy.



Jennifer Wakeman

The hills, ridges and valleys that make up the topography of Central Pennsylvania won't allow full coverage for all residents in the five counties, Wakeman

said. It will improve vastly upon what's already in place, she said.

"We've talked about it forever. The trick has always been where the money will come from," Wakeman said.

The money for this particular project comes from the federal coronavirus relief act, CARES funds.

Pandemic mitigation measures forced students and workers alike out of offices and schools to work and learn from home. It further exposed the consequences of poor internet connectivity. As a result, the federal legislation allocated \$100 million to expanding

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broadband in rural communities.

County commissioners across the Valley authorized portions of their respective CARES funding toward a cooperative expansion of broadband: Snyder and Union counties, \$600,000; Northumberland, \$1 million; Columbia, \$800,000; Montour, \$200,000.

Union County Commissioner Jeff Reber said the current board of commissioners picked up where prior boards left off in attempting to strengthen internet service in under-served and unserved parts of the county, namely western and northern areas.

The West End Library in Laurelton will be among the many beneficiaries of improved internet service, ensuring that all three libraries in the Union County public library system will serve as hubs for distance learning and work.

“That’s enough to get us to the western part. If there becomes more money available there’s a possibility of expanding north, also,” Reber said of Union County’s investment.

If you live in Snyder County and don’t have fiberoptic cable service or work at a local university, you’ve likely got connectivity issues, Snyder County Commissioner Joe Kantz said.

“I have those same issues at my house. I hear it every day. People can’t run their small businesses. I think in many ways it’s keeping small businesses from starting up or expanding,” Kantz said.

Final network design is about two weeks away, Wakeman said. There seems to be no room for any delays. CARES Act funding must be spent by

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recipients no later than Dec. 30 or returned to the U.S. Treasury.

Wakeman expressed confidence the deadline for expenditures will be met. She’s not alone. Reber and Kantz each said they believed expansion will be accomplished by year’s end.

As Wakeman explained, DRIVE will have to prove expansion was accomplished.

“We will be able to do that,” Wakeman said. “As we bring these towers online, people will be able to be hooked up. You don’t have to wait for the whole thing to be completed.”

Wakeman and Kantz both asked Valley residents to be patient as the project unfolds.

Once the infrastructure is in place it will take some time for internet service providers to join the network, Kantz said.

“This is not going to be a cure-all but it’s a start,” Kantz said.

“This is not a single solution to broadband. This is one of many solutions. We will not cover 100% of every single county. That is not feasible,” Wakeman said.