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Discover how communities are investing in their own Internet infrastructure to promote economic prosperity and improve quality of life.

Eight Pennsylvania Counties Join Forces to Improve Regional Connectivity

Thu, February 13, 2020 | Posted by [Lisa Gonzalez](https://muninetworks.org/users/lgonzalez)
(<https://muninetworks.org/users/lgonzalez>)



Local officials in eight mostly-rural counties in southwest Pennsylvania are combining efforts to determine first, what connectivity is available and, second, what can be done to improve it.

Seeking Updated Information

Westmoreland, Fayette, Cambria, Somerset, Blair, Bedford, Huntingdon, and Fulton counties have been working with consulting firm Design Nine [to develop a survey to share](https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/broadband-connectivity-study-survey-eyed-for-westmoreland-nearby-counties/) (<https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/broadband-connectivity-study-survey-eyed-for-westmoreland-nearby-counties/>) with residents in the region. The Regional Broadband Task Force, established by the Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission (SAP&DC), gathered limited data in the past. They estimate that six percent of folks in the region live in places without wired broadband Internet access.

An earlier study determined that:

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...2.3 percentage of the 354,751 residents fall below that level of service [25 Mbps upload and 3 Mbps download]. About 1.6 percentage of Blair County's 123,842 population and 2.2 percentage of Cambria County's 134,550 population are lacking that basic level of connectivity. At the other end of the spectrum, 55.2 percentage of Fulton County's 14,506 residents are without the service.

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ARC Funds

Funding for the study comes from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The Task Force [received \\$50,000 from ARC \(http://www.sapdc.org/news?t=sapdc-awarded-grant-funds-to-evaluate-and-promote-broadband-connectivity-in\)](http://www.sapdc.org/news?t=sapdc-awarded-grant-funds-to-evaluate-and-promote-broadband-connectivity-in) and the member counties contributed a matching \$50,000 for the study. They began looking for a firm to help develop the study last fall and [chose Design Nine hoping to determine \(http://www.sapdc.org/news?t=sapdc-awarded-grant-funds-to-evaluate-and-promote-broadband-connectivity-in\)](http://www.sapdc.org/news?t=sapdc-awarded-grant-funds-to-evaluate-and-promote-broadband-connectivity-in):

- Level of service being provided; the needs of local businesses and the reliability of the current services being provided;
- An inventory of broadband assets already in place;
- An assessment community broadband requirements for bandwidth needs;
- Determine best technologies to meet the coal impacted community needs; and
- Cost estimates for different deployment strategies

Businesses Want More in Westmoreland

While the Regional Broadband Task Force is seeking data about connections consistent with the FCC's definition of "broadband," business

owners and operators in the area believe those speeds are outdated. At a [recent kick-off meeting for stakeholders \(http://www.sapdc.org/news?t=sapdc-announces-broadband-study-kick-off-meetings\)](http://www.sapdc.org/news?t=sapdc-announces-broadband-study-kick-off-meetings), economic development professionals attended and [expressed the concerns of the business sector \(https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/broadband-connectivity-study-survey-eyed-for-westmoreland-nearby-counties/\)](https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/broadband-connectivity-study-survey-eyed-for-westmoreland-nearby-counties/):

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James Smith, president of the Greensburg-based Economic Growth Connection, argued that the 25 mbps benchmark is outdated as a connectivity goal, especially for businesses. “I’ve got businesses telling me if they don’t have a (gigabit per second), it’s not sufficient,” he said. “This is a business necessity moving forward, just like electricity. If we don’t have the ability to offer that, we’re going to lose.”

Smith cited connectivity issues at a business incubator in New Kensington. “They do very large video files,” he said. “They cannot move those files right now to the clients they need to move them to.”

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Discussion at the meeting included conversations about how lack of broadband is affecting local farms, loss of population, and possible local investment. Jack Maytum from Design Nine suggested that local communities should consider public investment to encourage broadband growth in their community. “[U]nderground conduits, utility poles and communications towers — that can be leased to wireless or fiber-optic broadband service providers,” can help create a more favorable environment for future public or private broadband infrastructure investment.

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He argued that wireless service alone can't satisfy the demand. "The radio spectrum is limited," he noted, while, with fiber-optic cable, he said, "the information capacity is practically unlimited. Fiber is the backbone of the infrastructure."

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Part of the Regional Comprehensive Plan

The examination of connectivity in the region is part of a broader plan to spur growth in the region. The "Alleghenies Ahead Comprehensive Plan," [completed in 2018 \(http://www.sapdc.org/allegheniesahead\)](http://www.sapdc.org/allegheniesahead), suggests that the region needs to make changes and improvements to reverse negative trends. With significant population aging and loss, the plan suggests investment in broadband as a way to attract jobs and new residents. Other recommendations include investments in housing, recreation and natural resources, agriculture, public health and safety, transportation, and taking a collaborative approach to accomplish regional goals.

[Read the full Comprehensive Plan \[PDF\] here \(http://www.sapdc.org/documents/Alleghenies_Ahead_Adopted.pdf\).](http://www.sapdc.org/documents/Alleghenies_Ahead_Adopted.pdf)

