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## Mon Commission, Comcast announce \$17.8M broadband deal

June 18, 2024 2:56 pm by Ben Conley, The Dominion Post

ORGANTOWN — The Monongalia County Commission on Tuesday announced a \$17.8 million public/private partnership with Comcast to deliver broadband access to the county’s western end and other unserved areas over the

**M** next 22 months.

Of that amount, \$5,980,000 will come out of the county's American Rescue Plan Act allocation. Comcast will come up with the rest (\$11,840,000).

Kevin Broadhurst, vice president of governmental affairs with Comcast, said the project will be a mix of buried fiber lines and aerial lines using existing poles.

Broadhurst said it'll likely be "a few" months before residents start seeing crews in the field.

"It's spread out across the western parts of the county, but it's also in the eastern side, too. So it really is scattered throughout the county in all of the more rural, unserved areas," Broadhurst said.

The anticipated number of homes and businesses to be impacted wasn't immediately available following Tuesday's meeting.

While the timeline for the entire projects is just under two years, areas will come online throughout the process.

"It's not going to be 22 months before we flip a switch and everybody is connected. As people can get connected they will be," Commission President Sean Sikora said, explaining those connections could be made by the end of the year in some cases.

Sikora explained this project will address the majority of the county's unserved areas that aren't already blocked due to previous grant awards. Grant awards like those from the 2019 Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), a \$20.4 billion initiative from the Federal Communication Commission that set up a reverse auction process for internet service providers with the goal of getting broadband into unserved and underserved census tracts.

It was previously explained that commitments made by ISPs under RDOF may not be realized for years, if ever. Nonetheless, once a grant was awarded to an ISP to cover a specific area, that area was essentially spoken for and no longer considered a need.

Sikora cautioned that even once this work is done there will still be dead zones in the county that will need to be addressed.

Tuesday's announcement is the culmination of three-plus years of work by the commission, its consultants and representatives from numerous community stakeholders serving as the county's broadband committee.

In May 2021, the commission hired Ohio-based Ice Miller for \$250,657 to help create a comprehensive broadband plan for the county.

Throughout the planning process, the county put up an additional \$380,000, approximately, split between Ice Miller for legal services and broadband consultant LIT Communities for professional services.

The resulting comprehensive broadband plan divided the county into 14 potential broadband rings, or projects, and identified the county's western end as the area of greatest need.

"We've done enough engineering where we really can give people the playbook for how to provide connectivity to our whole county," Sikora said.

In late 2023, the commission made its broadband plan part of a request for proposals from potential partners willing to help make it a reality.

Comcast and Frontier responded, bringing the county to Tuesday's announcement.

"Comcast is proud to be selected by Monongalia County to bring the Xfinity network to unserved and underserved residents and businesses," Keystone Region Senior Vice President Ricky Frazier Jr. said. "We look forward to delivering our fast, reliable Internet and innovative technology to residents and businesses as part of this network expansion."

Commissioners Tom Bloom and Jeff Arnett thanked Sikora for spearheading the county's efforts to close what Broadhurst called the "rural digital divide."

“He’s literally put in hundreds — and I don’t use that as an exaggeration — hundreds of hours into this. It’s been his baby from the beginning. Tom and I have been around for feedback and help when needed, but this has basically been all Sean. We appreciate the effort and work,” Arnett said. “We wouldn’t have gotten close to being here without all your diligence.”

Sikora said there was a long list of people involved in the process. Nonetheless, he’s ready to pass the baton.

“I’m happy to finally start handing stuff off and seeing shovels in the ground and people actually executing,” he said.

Local governments must obligate any remaining ARPA dollars by the end of this year, with plans to expend those obligations by the end of 2026.

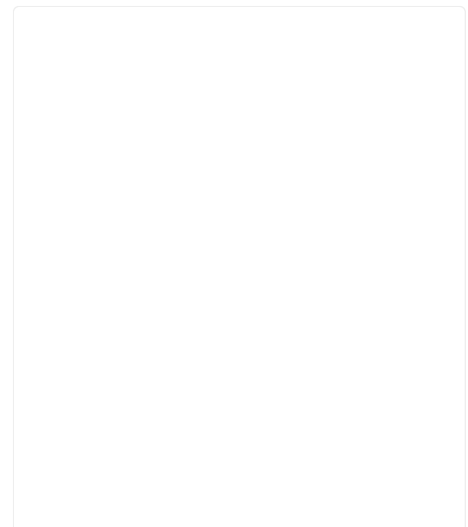
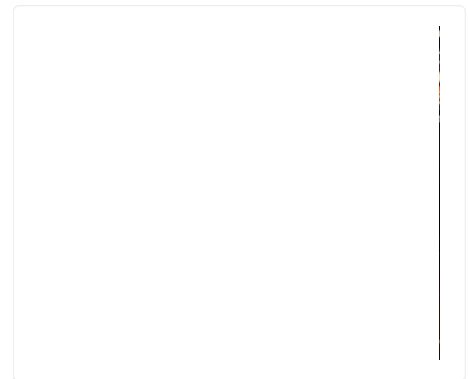
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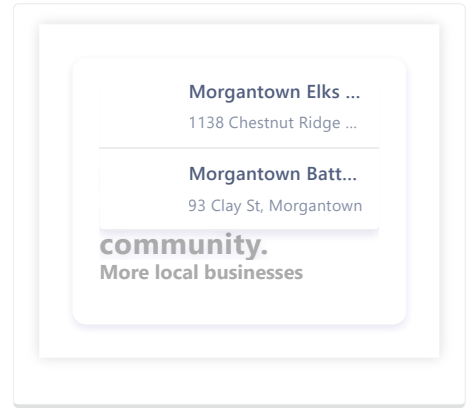
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