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The Pennsylvania House Majority Policy Committee, chaired by Rep. Kerry Benninghoff, held a hearing Thursday on rural broadband and internet access at a Susquehanna County site where few in the room even had cellphone service.

The hearing, held on the Elk Lake and Susquehanna County Career and Technology Center campus, offered up two panels of testimony. The first panel addressed the need for access; while the second panel – comprised of communication company professionals – talked about potential solutions to bring greater connectivity to rural Pennsylvanians.

Notably absent from the hearing was Frontier Communications, a primary telephone and internet provider in the northern tier counties represented at the hearing. Rep. Tina Pickett (R-110th, Towanda) said the provider, a leading phone and internet provider in the area, sent a message stating their ability to comment is limited due to “quiet period” restrictions of the upcoming CAF2 funding auction.

Pickett’s legislative district includes Dimock Twp., where the meeting was held. She said calls to her office grow daily from people looking for greater access to rural broadband service. In addition to Pickett, other legislators taking part in the hearing included: Rep. Michael Pfifer (139th); Rep. Jonathan Fritz (111th); Rep. Karen Boback (117th); Sen. Lisa Baker (20th); Eric Kauffer (120th); and David Millard (109th).

Chris Brown, of the Central Bradford Progress Authority, outlined the need and challenges; the role of fiber optics; and also offered up a potential solution. The Progress Authority handles economic development activities in both Susquehanna and Bradford

counties. Brown focused on the “middle mile” – the area between where there is an existing fiber network and the “last mile” network of business and residential users. The lack of middle mile investment and increase in bandwidth demand, Brown said, create a multi-dimensional issue in rural communities.

According to Brown, previous subsidies only targeted internet service providers with the hope they would increase end user bandwidth. In Bradford County, however, support of the service providers without a timeline for middle mile investments has not resulted in vast improvements to broadband accessibility. “The Progress Authority has been told by service providers that the speeds our businesses and residents realistically need cannot be met within a meaningful timeframe or at meaningful rates,” Brown said.

And, he continued, the federal and state minimum standard speeds do not hold up to what is realistically now required to handle the number of devices in businesses and households. Fiber optics would be optimum to build out the “middle mile,” he told the legislators. “...fiber optics, and technology backed fiber, are and will continue to be the highest and best uses of funds for broadband development.”

The Progress Authority proposed establishing public-private partnerships to develop the ‘middle mile’ infrastructure. Bradford County has moved forward into the first phase of a three part \$10 million project called the “Bradford County Open Access Network.” Susquehanna County has followed, authorizing \$175,000 of county funds to be used as a match for an ARC grant to complete a study and plan.

In addition to Brown, testimony was also heard from Laurel Mueller, a Sullivan County small business owner; Loren Stone and Brad Adleman, of Endless Mountains Health Systems; and Wayne County Commissioner Joseph Adams. EMHS CEO Loren Stone said the shift to providing telehealth services for patients requires bandwidth that is either unavailable or too costly.

Adleman, EMHS Director of IT, said 32.9 percent of Susquehanna County lacks a broadband service provider, DSL service is unreliable, and there is limited cell coverage. The lack of available service, he said, affects the medical facility’s ability to meet federal telehealth requirements. Adams said the lack of highspeed broadband in Wayne County is the top detriment to residents. He pointed out that the county was ranked 59th out of the 67 counties in the state for upload speed; and also 59th out of 67 in income. Cost of highspeed service, he said, comes at a price four to five times higher than what consumers in urban and suburban areas pay. He said it was a deterrent to business development.

The panel of professionals included Brian Barno, of the Broadband Cable Assoc. of PA (BCAP); Frank Buzydlowski, of Verizon; and Jay Summerson, of Microsoft. Barno addressed the costs associated with providers attaching to existing poles, saying often the poles don’t meet code. He also noted the lack of return on investment to take broadband into some rural areas but noted

BCAP was committed to providing service in smalltown, rural Pennsylvania.

While Buzydlowski focused on a future of wireless technology, Summerson said Microsoft was looking to develop television unlicensed “white space” technology – often referred to as “airband.” The company, he said, is looking for partners to make an investment with providers to offer the broadband service.

Barno said the final solution would be a combination of options, with some areas never having access to fiber, but rather 4G or the developing 5G wireless. Legislators asked the panelists questions, some involving the cost of service to consumers and other questions of how to make building out networks more attractive to service providers. Coming away from the hearing, Rep. Millard said, “There is promise. Technology marches on.”

Looking to the future Rep. Benninghoff asked, “In 10 years will it all be wireless? Will fiber and broadband be obsolete?” “A variety of technology will be needed to solve the problem,” reassured Barno. – *Wyoming County Examiner*

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Composer Sean Beeson’s clients are coastal, but he chooses to live in the serenity and quietude of Crestline, which is about 60 miles north of Columbus, in Richland and Crawford counties. Collaborating online and composing pieces for everything from documentaries to video games, commercials and amusement park rides, requires reliable, high-speed internet, he said.

Without it, it can sometimes be impossible for Beeson to reach clients or it can take weeks for him to upload and download large files. “There’s a lot of great things about living in the country — the internet is not one of them,” he said. “For my business, it probably would be beneficial to move.”

More than 1 million Ohioans have no access to fast, reliable broadband at home. Almost a third of Ohio’s rural residents lack at-home broadband, compared with just 2 percent of urban dwellers. That could change soon. The Ohio House approved a bill, 79-11, Wednesday aimed at addressing the state’s digital divide.

The measure, which would establish the Ohio Broadband Development Grant Program, now will go to the Senate, where an identical bill is pending in committee. Stu Johnson, a rural-connectivity advocate and executive director of broadband technology nonprofit group Connect Ohio, said he hopes the Senate can fit in a vote on the bill before it adjourns for the summer. “Everybody’s in favor of it, it’s just a calendar issue,” he said.

House Bill 378, sponsored by Reps. Ryan Smith, R-Bidwell, and Jack Cera, D-Bellaire, would create a program to provide \$50 million each year in grants to private businesses, political subdivisions, nonprofit organizations and phone and internet cooperatives. It would expand coverage to about 14,000 Ohio households annually without raising taxes or using money from

the state's General Revenue Fund. Instead, it would use existing funding from Ohio Third Frontier bond revenue, an economic-development initiative administered by the state.

Advocates say lack of affordable, reliable high-speed internet has rippling effects on health care, local commerce and education in rural communities. "People have to drive to the library or McDonald's to get on their Wi-Fi," said Cera. "I realize not everybody wants to be connected all the time, but our world has become so interconnected with the internet that it's become basic infrastructure along with water, electric and everything else."

Beeson, the Crestline-based composer, said closing the digital gap would place rural Ohio on a level economic playing field, but it would require concerted effort. "We treat the internet like a sacred commodity around my house. When it goes out, we lose everything," he said. "There's no way rural areas will get high-speed broadband on their own. It just won't happen." – **Columbus (OH) Dispatch**

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After lawmakers volleyed dozens of questions at Facebook Inc. chief Mark Zuckerberg, Silicon Valley had one for Congress: Why don't you get us?

Some tech workers tuning in to [Mr. Zuckerberg's hours long session](#) some 2,500 miles away on Tuesday said they cringed at his interrogators, worried that their understanding of the internet could result in poorly crafted or overly burdensome regulation. Sen. Brian Schatz (D., Hawaii) mistook WhatsApp, Facebook's popular text-messaging tool, for an email service. Sen. Roger Wicker (R., Miss.) asked for clarification when Mr. Zuckerberg referred to internet service providers as the "pipes" of the internet. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R., W.Va.) asked whether Facebook could provide West Virginia with "fiber"—a service the company doesn't offer.

"It's a reminder of how far Silicon Valley has to go to educate policy makers and the public about our companies and products," said Rebecca Reeve, CEO of public-relations firm Rsquared Communication, which represents tech startups such as messaging company Slack Technologies Inc. and streamed all four hours of the hearings on an office television.

Government officials and tech executives have a long history of poor communication. But the pressure to educate the public and find a common language is growing with the threat of greater government oversight. The congressional testimony, extending into Wednesday, is as much a public examination of the tech industry as it is a questioning of Facebook. During Tuesday's hearing, Sen. John Thune (R., S.D.) and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) both said federal intervention in tech platforms might be necessary. Or as Sen. John Kennedy (R., La.) put it, "I don't want to vote to have to regulate Facebook, but by God I will."

The talk of regulation bothered George Arison, a founder of used-car-buying website Shift Technologies Inc. "Most people in Congress don't have a clue about what [tech] actually does," he

said. “That’s a very dangerous situation to be in.” Michael Fertik, founder of venture firm Heroic Ventures and privacy-management firm Reputation.com Inc., said he worries that lawmakers aren’t asking Facebook tough questions. Change is overdue, he said, but he worries Congress will cripple young startups with carelessly crafted rules. “They will make it hard for startups to compete with Facebook,” he said.

Mr. Zuckerberg mostly remained poised as he answered questions from the senators, many more than twice his age, but having to repeatedly explain how Facebook works left him seeming agitated at times. During one exchange, Sen. Kennedy asked whether Facebook would allow users to have certain controls over their data. Mr. Zuckerberg replied, seven times, that Facebook already does. Sen. Gary Peters (D., Mich.) asked whether Facebook is using the microphones of users’ phones to listen in to what they are doing and saying—a charge the company has denied repeatedly in recent months. “You’re talking about this conspiracy theory,” a slightly animated Mr. Zuckerberg answered. “We don’t do that.”

Chris Nolan, founder of ad-buying firm Spot-On, which works with tech companies, said Mr. Zuckerberg risks coming across as a “smarty-pants” from Silicon Valley. “I don’t think that is going to serve Facebook well in the long run,” she said. “Congress likes to see conciliation and humility.”

Other techies, like Erik Charlton, said they didn’t expect Capitol Hill to be as technically sophisticated as Silicon Valley. “There’s going to be a period of us learning to speak together through shared understanding,” said Mr. Charlton, the CEO of smart-home lighting startup Noon Home Inc. The Wall Street reaction to Mr. Zuckerberg’s testimony was largely positive; Facebook shares rose 4.5% Tuesday.

Mr. Zuckerberg “absolutely hit it over the fence,” said Shad Rowe, general partner at Dallas-based Greenbrier Partners Capital, a long-term holder of Facebook shares. He described Mr. Zuckerberg as patient, composed and “completely in charge of the conversation.” Two weeks ago, in the wake of the [Cambridge Analytica revelations](#), Mr. Rowe sent his firm’s investors a letter criticizing Facebook’s handling of user data, but Mr. Zuckerberg’s congressional performance persuaded him to hold his shares. “I don’t want to sell,” he said Tuesday. “I think Zuck is a hard guy to bet against. He’s always kind of comes through.” – *Wall Street Journal*



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