PA House of Representatives

Republican Policy Committee

414, Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120
(717) 260-6144

Rep. Joshua D. Kail
Chairman

PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing

"Advancing Our Rural Connectivity"

October 24, 2023, at 2 p.m.

Fay-Penn Economic Development Council
1040 Eberly Way, Suite 100
Lemont Furnace, PA 15456

2:00 p.m.	Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance
	Community Connectivity Panel
2:10 p.m.	Gregg Downer *Supervisor, Luzerne Township*
2:15 p.m.	Richard Black *911 GIS/Systems Manager, Fayette County Emergency Management Agency; Paramedic, Brownsville Ambulance Service; Fire Chief, Brownsville Fire Company No. 1*
2:20 p.m.	Questions for the Community Connectivity Panel
	Broadband Connectivity Panel
2:50 p.m.	Brandon Carson *Executive Director, PA Broadband Development Authority*
2:55 p.m.	Andrew French *Executive Director, Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette*
3:00 p.m.	Questions for the Broadband Connectivity Panel
	Cellphone Connectivity Panel
3:30 p.m.	Jeremy Crandall *Assistant Vice President, State Legislative Affairs, CTIA*
3:35 p.m.	Questions for the Cellphone Connectivity Panel
4:05 p.m.	Closing Comments

Testifier Biographies

PA House of Representatives Policy Committee Hearing
"Advancing Our Rural Connectivity"

Gregg Downer
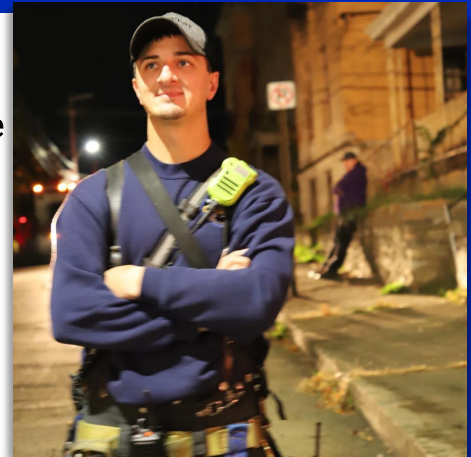### Supervisor, Luzerne Township

Gregg Downer currently serves as one of the three township supervisors for Luzerne Township in Fayette County, PA.

Luzerne Township is located along the western edge of Fayette County and is bordered to the west by the Monongahela River. With a total area of 30.7 square miles, Luzerne Township has a population of over 5,600 individuals.

Richard Black
911 GIS/Systems Manager, Fayette County Emergency Management Agency; Paramedic, Brownsville Ambulance Service; Fire Chief, Brownsville Fire Company No. 1

In addition to serving as the 911 GIS/Systems Manager for the Fayette County Emergency Management Agency, Richard also serves as a paramedic for Brownsville Ambulance Service and as Fire Chief for Brownsville Fire Company No. 1.

Richard holds dual bachelor's degrees from the California University of Pennsylvania, Geography/GIS and Emergency Management, and two graduate degrees from Columbia Southern University, a Masters of Emergency Management & Homeland Security and a Masters of Public Administration.

Brandon Carson
Executive Director, PA Broadband Development Authority

Brandon Carson has more than 15 years of experience working in non-profit and local government management advancing community and economic development projects and initiatives across Pennsylvania.

Most recently, he has focused his efforts on increasing access to affordable broadband services in unserved and underserved areas.

In his current role as Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority, Brandon is working to develop and implement the state's broadband mission, to foster and create equitable, affordable, and robust high-speed broadband services connecting Pennsylvania for the 21st century and beyond. He is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the Broadband Office and leads an outstanding team dedicated to closing the Digital Divide in Pennsylvania.

Andrew French
Executive Director, Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette

Andrew French currently serves as the Executive Director for the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette.

Since its creation in 1949, the Redevelopment Authority has worked to develop and implement programs designed to strengthen and revitalize local communities in Fayette County. Their specific strategies for addressing housing, economic, and community development needs in the County have focused on upgrading and expanding the local infrastructure (water, roads, and storm and sanitary sewer systems), combating blighting influences, supporting homeownership and housing rehabilitation activities, and promoting the installation and improvement of recreational areas.

The Authority's accomplishments over the past 60+ years include: the investment of over $51.2 million in funding through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program to support over 650 infrastructure improvement projects; the investment of over $28 million to assist over 10,500 households; and the implementation of special projects and initiatives, such as the development of the 270-acre Fayette County Business Park, which has leveraged substantial public and private resources to create quality professional and retail economic development opportunities.

Jeremy Crandall
Assistant Vice President, State Legislative Affairs, CTIA

Jeremy Crandall is the Assistant Vice President, State Legislative Affairs for CTIA which represents the U.S. wireless communications industry. From carriers and equipment manufacturers to mobile app developers and content creators.

Formerly, Jeremy served as Director of State Affairs for the National Association of Community Health Centers, spearheading their state-related work on COVID response, Medicaid funding, telehealth, 340B, FQHC payment and delivery reform, behavioral health and primary care workforce issues.

Jeremy previously spent six years working on state-based issues at the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association and the Pew Charitable Trusts, and eight years before that in Maryland state politics with Attorney General Brian Frosh and State Delegate Heather Mizeur. He lives in Washington, DC.

<u>Testimony – Gregg Downer</u>

We have a few areas where internet service is not available. Roads where internet is not available include: Knox road, Murphy road, Adah Palmer road, East riverside road, East rices landing road, oak hill road, and a portion of Bull Run road. The portions of these roads that do have internet are because they still have a land line with Verizon.

What has happened in some of these areas is that the land lines have gone bad because of age and Verizon will not repair them. These people have no way to communicate with anyone unless they drive about three miles from their home so they can get cell service. They can't even call 911 or anyone if they have an emergency.

We had an elderly lady that couldn't contact her family when she needed assistance. They even bought a monitoring system but that wouldn't work because she needed the internet.

With the terrain in our area cell service is very bad. We have a lot of dead areas. I appreciate your time and look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

House of Reps/Senate Testimony

Impact of Rural Broadband (Emergency Response Service)

Positive

- Internet connectivity

Negative

- Utility companies may have a large investment in a small rural area with little customers

Other Considerations

- COVID-19 = Schools/Workforce were remote, expanded demands on home connectivity

Cell Service Expansion (Emergency Response Service)

Positive

- Cell phones are more common than house phones // the ability for connectivity for the outside world
  - The ability to call 911, as needed.
    - Better location information
      - RapidSOS
      - Phase 2 wireless call
      - Smaller uncertainty with bad confidence level or Phase 1 call
      - RapidSOS – Prepared Live

Negative

- None.

Other Considerations

- LANDLINE - ANI/ALI Information
- Weather, natural disasters – what is the backup redundancy?
  - Loss of power
  - Trees down, knocking lines down
    - Triage the areas

Luzerne Township –

Questions

1. Where does this person live?
2. Was the call attempted on a house phone or cell phone?
   a. If cell, who was the carrier?
3. What was the date/time of this attempted call?

Tower Locations:

1. Albany Hill
2. Everview Drive
3. Hatfield Road
4. 49 High Street, Fredericktown
5. 325 Thomas Road, Cumberland Township, Greene County

3 Most Common Cell Phone Providers

1. Verizon Wireless
2. AT&T
3. T-Mobile
4. Straight Talk (Wal Mart)
   a. Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile and your phone will be connected to one of the three, generally the best-performing network for your area.

Process of 911 call with NG911:

<To be explained>

Other:

- FCC National Broadband Map
- Phones for Low Income
  - SafeLink Wireless
  - Access Wireless

Good afternoon. I'm Brandon Carson, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority (PBDA). Thank you to the members of the Policy Committee for inviting me here today. The PBDA was established in December of 2021 and is led by an 11-member board of directors. PBDA is an independent agency within the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development with a mission to close the digital divide and connect all Pennsylvanians.

The Problem: We know that data from the Federal Communications Commission identifies more than 330,000 locations across the Commonwealth as lacking access to reliable, high-speed internet service. We also know that the rural parts of the Commonwealth are disproportionately impacted by lack of connectivity. Indeed, while only 26% of Pennsylvania's residents live in rural areas, 81% of the households lacking access to reliable, high-speed service in Pennsylvania can be found in those parts of the state.

The Opportunity: Pennsylvania has been allocated roughly $1.5 billion in federal dollars through the American Rescue Plan Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to build accessible, high-speed broadband internet infrastructure throughout the Commonwealth. While these federal dollars will primarily fund broadband infrastructure, we anticipate receiving additional funding for digital literacy initiatives, to equip Pennsylvanians with the skills, capacity, and knowledge needed to fully participate in the digital economy.

It is important to note that the funds available to PBDA must be used for fixed terrestrial broadband services through technologies like fiber-optic, coaxial cable, and fixed wireless connections to homes, businesses, and community anchor institutions. This technology differs from cellular and mobile broadband service which is designed to be used on-the-go with seamless connectivity from one location to another.

The Challenges We Face:

The federal funds allocated to Pennsylvania will be distributed as competitive grant awards over the next two years. As infrastructure construction begins, one of PBDA's functions will be to help local and county governments prepare for successful implementation. We anticipate some obstacles, such as permitting delays. Therefore, PBDA is collaborating closely with various state agencies to better understand potential issues. Along those same lines, we are in the process of developing a "Broadband Ready" strategy to help local governments reduce procedural, policy, and permitting barriers to broadband deployment.

Additionally, we know that Pennsylvania will experience a deficit in the number of skilled workers necessary to successfully carry out this level of construction over the next several years. To help address this, we are partnering with the Department of Labor & Industry, which recently announced nearly $800,000 in grant funding for apprenticeship programs to help train more workers to build broadband infrastructure. Potential supply chain shortages for construction materials and equipment could also

present a challenge. We are exploring this as well and working with industry partners and other stakeholders to ensure access to the right equipment and materials.

PBDA's plan acknowledges these obstacles and establishes a path forward to address them in the coming months and years. We identified and outlined these potential obstacles not because they are insurmountable, but as a roadmap for action. We do this work in close collaboration with local and federal partners, along with industry, labor, and other key stakeholders across Pennsylvania.

To Close: PBDA staff have traveled throughout the Commonwealth to meet with residents, local elected officials, and community leaders to better understand the specific needs and concerns related to expanding broadband and digital literacy. We are in the process of finalizing our strategies and federal funding proposals to prepare for implementation of these projects. In the coming months, you will hear more about grant opportunities for broadband expansion in areas lacking it. Thank you again for your attention to this important issue, and I am happy to take questions from the committee.

Testimony provided by Andrew French, Executive Director, Fayette County Redevelopment Authority.
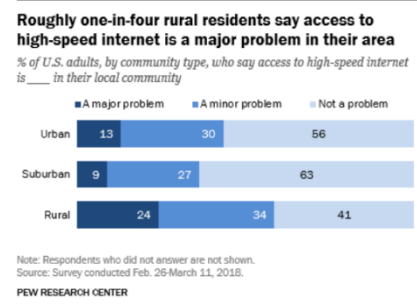
I'd first like to say that I greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony to the Republican Policy Committee on the very important topic of Advancing Rural Connectivity. In addition to Chairman Representative Kail, I would also like to thank Representative Ryan Warner and Representative Charity Grimm Krupa for working to bring the Committee to Fayette County and inviting me to participate in the discussion.

My name is Andrew French and I serve as the Executive Director of the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County. Located in southwestern Pennsylvania, I am sure each of you are aware of the tremendous assets Fayette County has to offer: The Great Laurel Highlands, Ohiopyle State Park, Fallingwater, and so much more. Unfortunately, despite those assets, like so many other counties in the Commonwealth, we also have some serious challenges. One of those challenges includes a County that is transitioning and needs to provide access and connectivity to broadband.

Working in partnership with the Fayette County Commissioners, the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority developed the Fayette County Broadband Expansion Initiative to expand the fiber-based broadband network throughout the County in order to provide high-speed broadband access for area homes and businesses. Prior phases of the Initiative focused on expanding the fiber-optic backbone of the network and establishing free access by creating a web of wi-fi hot spots in strategic locations throughout the County. The next phase targeted for funding through the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority (PBDA) COVID-19 Capital Projects Fund (CPF) will build the County's network beyond these core lines in order to serve unserved and underserved residents and businesses in low-to-moderate income and disadvantaged areas of the County.

The 2020 COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic caused social and economic turmoil, both nationally and internationally. In addition to the medical and economic crisis caused by the virus, the pandemic also further exposed another crisis that existed, the lack of adequate broadband infrastructure in order to allow citizens and businesses the ability to access remote education, health care, emergency services, and commerce. While the lack of broadband is a wide-spread concern, it has disproportionately impacted Fayette County given our high concentrations of low-to-moderate income residents.

According the Pew Research Center, high-speed internet access is a problem for 58% of those living in rural areas. Based on a County-wide Needs Assessment, it was confirmed that the lack of high-speed broadband access was one of the most critical issues affecting the County. The inability of families to have adequate service negated their ability to tele-educate, tele-work, or to receive tele-medicine. Recent studies have shown that a large majority of people do not have high-speed internet at their homes. Many low-income homeowners are not able to afford even the basic internet service that may be provided and instead rely on their phones, which only provides limited service at best.

Roughly one-in-four rural residents say access to high-speed internet is a major problem in their area

% of U.S. adults, by community type, who say access to high-speed internet is ___ in their local community

	A major problem	A minor problem	Not a problem
Urban	13	30	56
Suburban	9	27	63
Rural	24	34	41

Note: Respondents who did not answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted Feb. 26-March 11, 2018.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

This Pew Research Center article specifically states, "rural adults remain less likely than suburban adults to have home broadband and less likely than urban adults to own a smartphone, tablet computer or traditional computer." Other key notes from this article state:
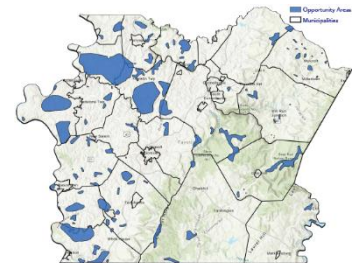- "Rural adults are also less likely than suburban and urban adults to have multiple devices or services that enable them to go online: Three-in-ten adults who live in rural communities' report owning or having a desktop or laptop computer, a smartphone, a home broadband connection, and a tablet computer, compared with 44% of urban and 43% of suburban adults.

- In a 2018 Center survey, adults who lived in rural areas were more likely to say access to high-speed internet was a major problem in their local community: 24% said this, compared with 13% of urban adults and 9% of suburban adults. Similar rates of concern about access to high-speed internet were shared by rural adults in both lower- and higher-income households, as well as by those with various levels of educational attainment."

The overall planning of the Fayette County Broadband Expansion Initiative began with the County's participation in a joint broadband study with the Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission. That study was completed in 2020 and included meetings with stakeholders, interviews and meetings with businesses, local officials, and residents to determine unserved and underserved areas of the County. Fayette County also participated in the Connectivity Roadmap planning study that was conducted by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC), which was completed in 2022.

In 2023 Fayette County completed a comprehensive Analysis of Broadband Infrastructure utilizing the firm of Micheal Baker International. Known also as *Connect Fayette*, the analysis confirmed the lack of adequate broadband access throughout the County and helped focus the County's overall Initiative in areas identified as unserved and underserved based on a review of data from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and extensive surveying of area residents and interviews with Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

Once completed, the Analysis identified several *"Connectivity Opportunity Areas"* (COAs) across the County, which are those zones of areas that have clusters of primarily unserved consumers. The Analysis further indicated there were a total of 2,374 total addresses within the COAs that were unserved/underserved. Beyond the COAs, the number of unserved/underserved is obviously much higher. A complete copy of the County's Broadband Analysis may be found at https://connectfayettepa.com. The results of all these plans have served as the basis for structuring the Fayette County's Broadband Expansion Initiative.
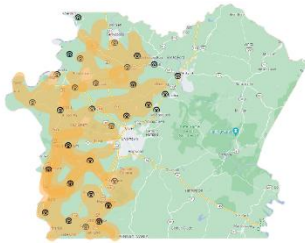
The first phase of implementation of the County Broadband Expansion Initiative began in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic utilizing funding provided through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act. Phase I invested **$5.3 million** in CARES funding to expand the fiber-based network in the County to create 29 high-speed hot-spot locations in the most rural areas of the County. Included in this phase of the project was Ohiopyle Borough, which was a severely unserved and underserved community and hosts over 1.5 million visitors each year for whitewater rafting, hiking, biking, and other outdoor recreational activities.

The second phase of the Initiative which is currently being implemented involves utilizing funding through the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program. Funding through the CDBG Program was provided by the County and each of the larger Entitlement Townships located in the targeted area, as well as through two (2) Competitive CDBG allocations provided by DCED. This phase is also supported through an additional $1.5 million investment by Fayette County through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) that was allocated in May 2023. As indicated in the chart below, **$4.6 million** in funding is being utilized for this phase, which will create another network of high-speed hot-spot locations in the western and north-central areas of the County. More importantly, this phase provides direct access to middle-mile fiber infrastructure which can be used to support future expansion of the network to homes and businesses.

The prior and current phases of Fayette County's Broadband Expansion Initiative would not have been possible without the public-private partnership that was established between the County and their Redevelopment Authority and Vitalink, a privately owned company headquartered in Markleysburg Borough, Fayette County. Vitalink was not only the low bidder on each phase of Fayette County's Initiative, they have also been integral in partnering with the County and municipalities to expand fiber-based access to broadband throughout Fayette County.

NEXT PHASE AND MOVING FORWARD

Based upon our experience and analysis, we strongly believe that a fiber to the premises (FTTP) solution is required to meet the Broadband necessities of today and the expanding demands of the future. Therefore, next Phase of Fayette County's Broadband Expansion Initiative will expand the fiber-based network established in the prior phases to provide high-speed fiber-based broadband access directly to homes and businesses that are currently unserved or underserved. The areas targeted for expansion of the network are those that have been prioritized by the County based on extensive community outreach and planning. This phase is also intended to provide affordable access to the network to help residents with varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

Based on an evaluation of the various plans and analyses, Vitalink worked with the County and the Redevelopment Authority to identify priority areas in eleven (11) municipalities, primarily located in the western portion of the County, which also served as the targeted area for the current CDBG-ARPA funded phase of the Initiative. If successful, this phase will install fiber lines along 118.09 miles of roadways and will provide direct fiber-based broadband access to an estimated 1,946 unserved and 81 underserved locations.

CONCLUSION

Given the past, current and future projected investments, Fayette County clearly recognizes the importance of developing solutions related to rural connectivity and access to broadband. We believe we have developed and are implementing a plan for our County that addresses this challenge, we just need the resources to implement. Fortunately, those resources are available through the current COVID-19 ARPA PA Broadband Infrastructure Program and through the pending funding the Commonwealth will be deploying through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. Our hope is that funding through both of these programs will be utilized to address the highest priorities established by local Counties throughout the Commonwealth. Working in partnership with the Commonwealth, the County, Townships, Boroughs, and local private sector providers such as Vitalink, the Redevelopment Authority is confident that broadband connectivity to all residents throughout Fayette County is achievable.
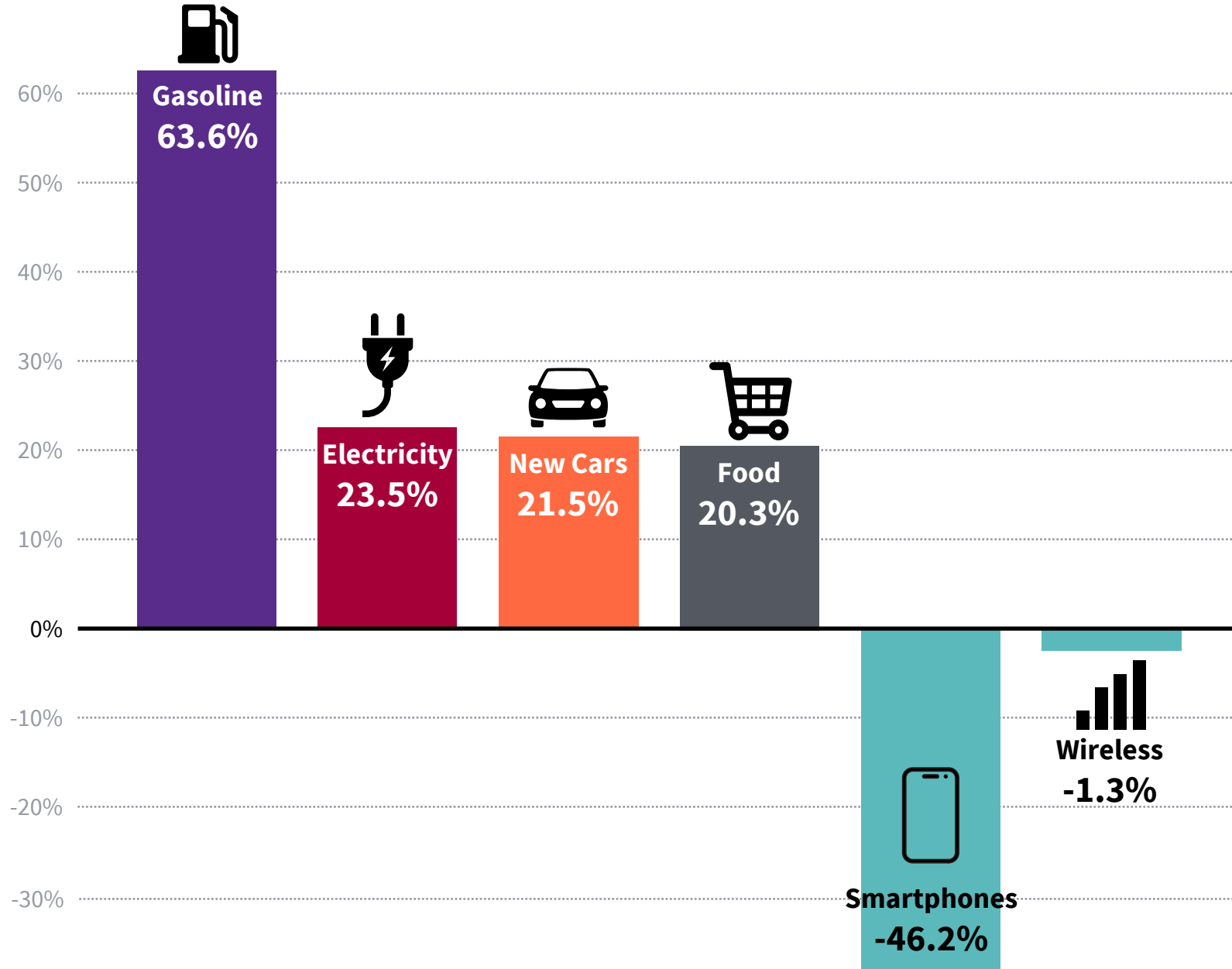
Wireless Industry and Pennsylvania

October 2023

ctia™

Wireless Prices Decrease in Face of Historic Inflation

Gasoline
63.6%

Electricity
23.5%

New Cars
21.5%

Food
20.3%

Wireless
-1.3%

Smartphones
-46.2%

60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
-10%
-20%
-30%

73%
of goods/services tracked increased in price over last year

Two items that went down in price—

Wireless Service & Smartphones
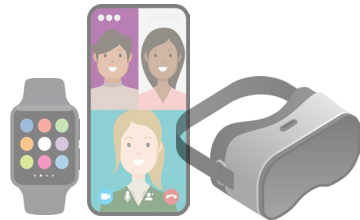
July 2020-July 2023

Wireless Impact in Pennsylvania

102,600
WIRELESS-RELATED JOBS

$16.2B
ECONOMIC IMPACT (GDP)

104%
WIRELESS SUBSCRIPTIONS COMPARED TO STATE POPULATION

77%
HIGHER PAY FOR WIRELESS JOBS
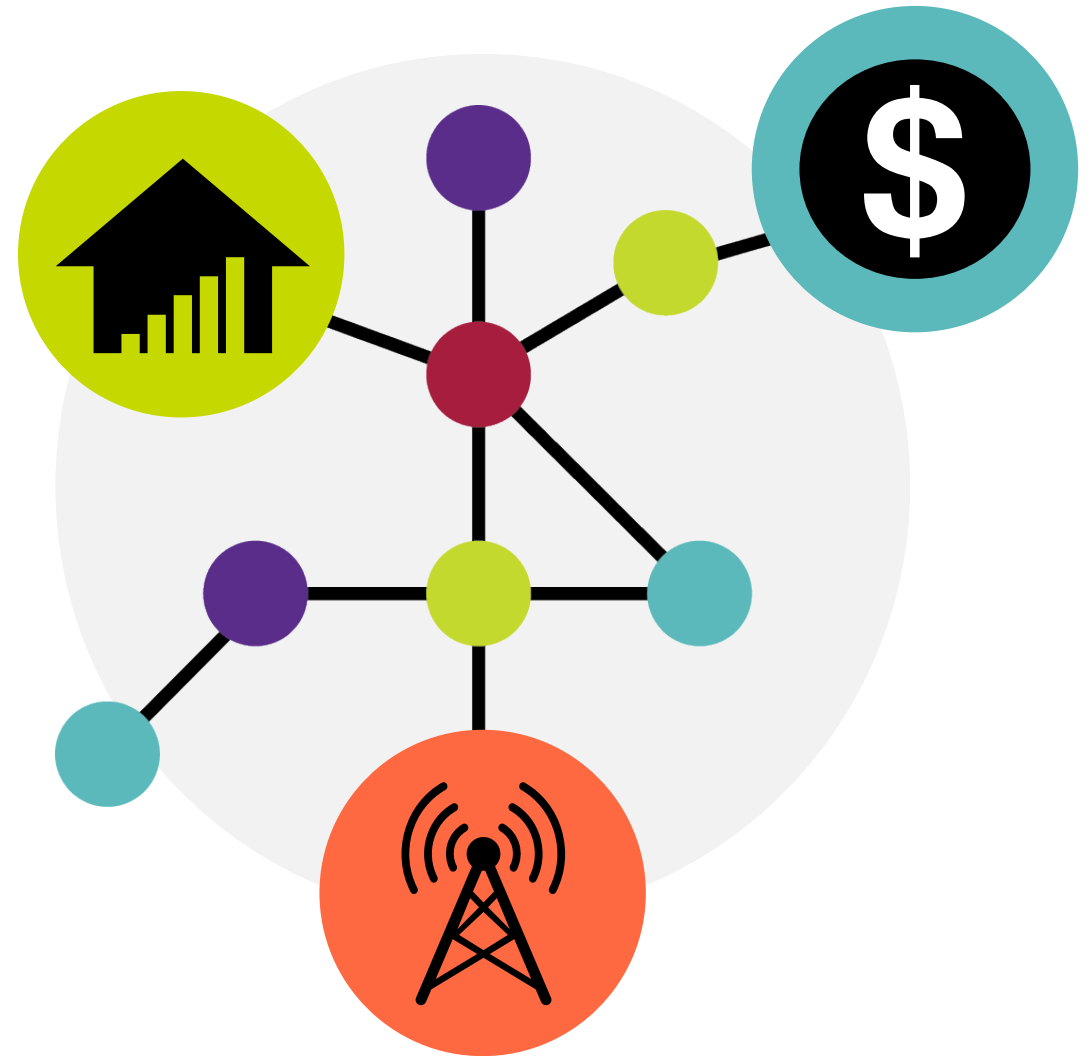
13.6M
WIRELESS SUBSCRIBER CONNECTIONS

$5.4 B
PAY & BENEFITS FROM WIRELESS INDUSTRY

Wireless Priorities for 2024 and Beyond

Meeting exploding demand for services requires an environment that enables wireless deployment…
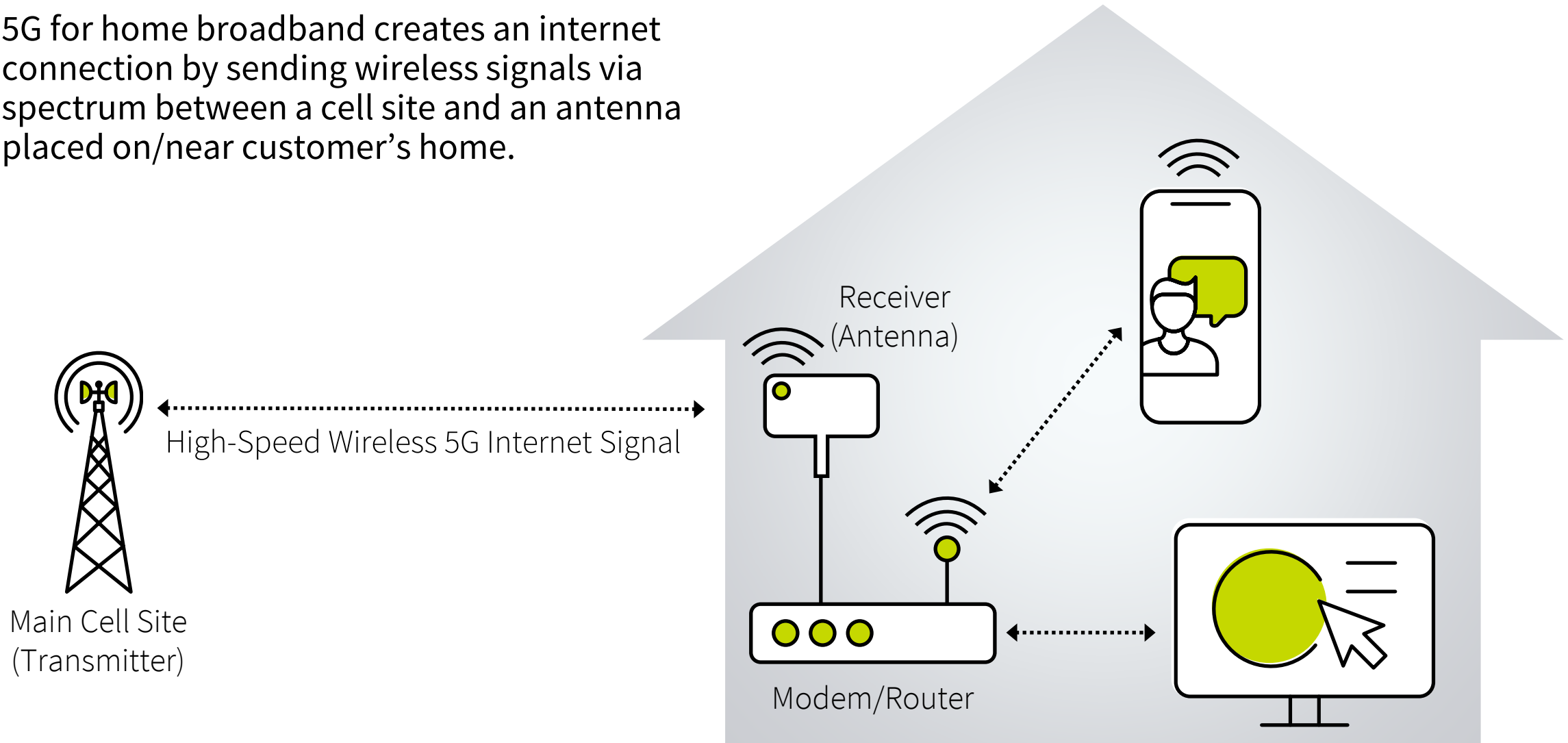
- **Competitive, tech-neutral broadband policies** that encourage Pennsylvania to choose projects that make the most sense for each community

- **A positive tax, fee and regulatory climate** that incentivizes private investment in wireless

- Continued support and encouragement of policies that **promote widespread and expeditious wireless deployments**

Pennsylvania can utilize recent funding to support wireless home broadband

5G for home broadband creates an internet connection by sending wireless signals via spectrum between a cell site and an antenna placed on/near customer's home.

Receiver (Antenna)

High-Speed Wireless 5G Internet Signal

Main Cell Site (Transmitter)

Modem/Router

5G Home Broadband Is Key to Closing the Digital Divide

43%
Can help connect almost half of rural homes in America

94M
Homes have access, a 2.4x increase from 2021 to 2022

Wireless is the On Ramp to the Internet for Millions of Americans

15%
Households are smartphone-only

54%
ACP low-income recipients pick wireless

Support Pro-Growth Tax & Fee Structure

Wireless companies look to states that welcome investment in their networks through positive tax and fee policies, including:
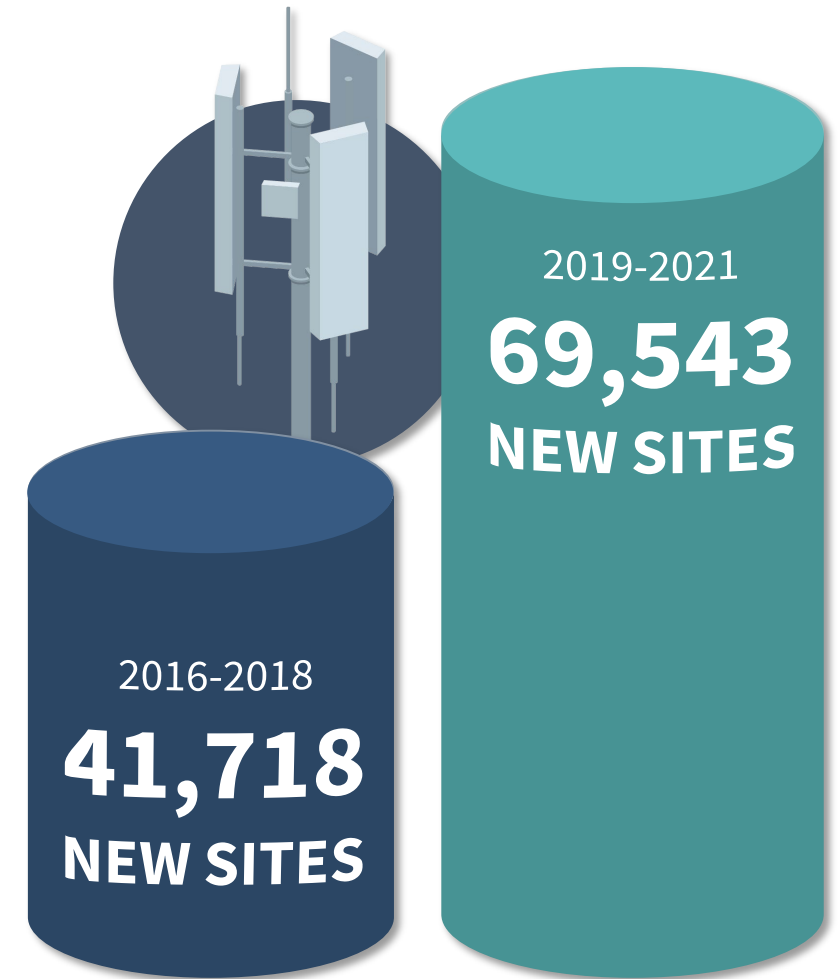
- Modernizing the sales tax exemption language for broadband equipment

- Repeal of the Gross Receipts Tax

- 9-1-1 Fees

Pro-Growth Infrastructure Deployment Policies to Meet Consumer Demands

Deployment of wireless infrastructure requires state and local predictability. Key approaches to do so include:

- Streamlining permitting, fees and colocation for small cells, macro towers (Act 191-2012, Act 50-2021)

- Collaboration and encouragement for local policymakers to promote and expand wireless infrastructure deployment

- Promoting wireless infrastructure deployment on state lands in close collaboration with state officials

2019-2021
69,543
NEW SITES

2016-2018
41,718
NEW SITES

Operational U.S. Cell Sites