

Press Release



For business and local editors

Westmoreland County hires Michael Baker International to design and deploy equitable broadband internet plan

GREENSBURG, Pa., May 12, 2022 - The Westmoreland County Board of Commissioners has taken a significant step toward improving broadband internet access throughout the county. Michael Baker International has been hired to lead efforts to bring reliable internet service to unserved and underserved locations. The firm also is tasked with ensuring residents have access to affordable options and digital literacy programs.

In February, the Westmoreland County Planning Department convened a Broadband Taskforce which has been meeting monthly to determine a preferred consultant. The Taskforce is comprised of technical professionals, as well as other stakeholders throughout the county including healthcare, agriculture, business, education, public safety, non-profits, municipal and state officials. Now that a consultant has been chosen, the Taskforce will be key in helping develop an equitable broadband internet plan.

With funding supplied by the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the county will pay Michael Baker approximately \$660,000 for the first year of work to:

- create an equitable broadband expansion plan for the county,
- identify areas in need of an investment in broadband infrastructure, including two early action projects, and
- aid the county in creating a partnership with a private internet provider to expand its services to those target areas.

To support these initiatives, the engineering/consulting firm will conduct community meetings, gather field data, assist the county with grant funding, engineer potential high-level solutions and provide project management services for the installation of the required infrastructure. Data gathered in the field will be crucial to provide accurate service data for future funding opportunities, and to potentially dispute the Federal Communications Commission mapping if found to be inaccurate, thus ensuring Westmoreland has access to the maximum level of federal funding. The county will have the option to retain the company for up to four additional years for continued project management services, and it anticipates using ARPA funds or any future grants awarded for broadband expansion.

Developing broadband capacity was first identified as a priority in the county's 2018 comprehensive plan, [*Reimagining Our Westmoreland*](#) and as the internet had become an increasingly integral part of nearly every aspect of life. The county has collaborated with the

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Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission since 2020 to identify broadband challenges and opportunities at a regional level.

Chairman Sean Kertes noted that the pandemic has illustrated just how essential broadband access is.

“A good internet connection is essential for many reasons, but ensuring our residents have access to telemedicine is extremely important, especially for the county’s aging population,” Kertes said. “It is also necessary for children and adults to attend school or complete homework, as well as for our residents to access job opportunities or to work from home.”

The pandemic has also had a negative financial impact on many residents according to Vice-Chairman Doug Chew.

“Not only will the county be looking to get good internet to people and places that do not currently have access, we will also be looking to create affordable options,” Chew said. “It is essential we take a leadership position to close the digital divide and ensure all Westmoreland residents have the same opportunities to prosper.”

According to the [Equitable Broadband Access Connectivity Roadmap](#) that Southwestern Pennsylvania Connected released last month, surveys conducted in Westmoreland County in late 2021 found that when it comes to internet, respondents were most unhappy with the cost of service.

While access to the internet has immediate benefit to constituents, it also helps the county set up for future economic success.

“As we try to entice new residents and businesses to move to the county, having a strong internet connection will make the county more attractive, especially to younger people,” said Secretary Gina Cerilli Thrasher. “Larger firms will have the service they need to open up business and create better job opportunities, people will be able to work remotely, and families will be confident that their children will have access to distance learning as well.”

As the county enters into this agreement with Michael Baker International, the next steps will be going out into the field to gather data and community input, as well as creating a website for transparency and feedback.

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For more information please contact:

Jason Rigone, Director, Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development,
724-830-3601, jrigone@co.westmoreland.pa.us