

Community group Anne Arundel Connecting Together calls on politicians to promote universal internet access

By LILLY PRICE

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A 15-year contract determining what cable and internet providers can operate in Anne Arundel County is set to expire next December, amid a new, digitally driven world escalated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Anne Arundel Connecting Together, a coalition of faith and community groups, called on Anne Arundel County politicians Thursday night to support residents struggling with slow or no internet connection when negotiating the next contract.

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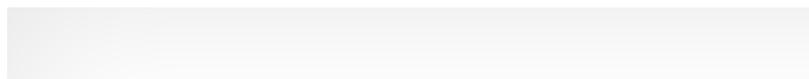
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Cable companies need to sign franchise agreements with local jurisdictions to offer cable service within a county or city's boundaries. Local governments can collect fees up to 5% of the companies cable revenue. Many cable companies also offer telephone and broadband services, but governments do not see that revenue.

County Executive Steuart Pittman and County Council members Jessica Haire, R-Edgewater; Allison Pickard, D-Millersville; Andrew Pruski, D-Gambrills; Lisa Rodvien, D-Annapolis; Democratic state Sens. Pamela Beidle and Sarah Elfreth and Dels. Joseline Peña-Melnyk and Dana Jones all agreed to work with ACT and invite stakeholders from all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds to be apart of contract negotiations in December 2021.

Pittman said of all havoc brought by the pandemic, one silver lining is it exposed holes in community safety nets. He said he wasn't aware the agreement was up for revision and is in favor of establishing universal internet access.

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“It certainly showed us if we don't provide this

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It certainly showed us if we don't provide this access to our families ... and folks of all ages in this county, we're failing them," Pittman said. "It's a modern human right that we need to deliver on, and I want to be one of the first counties in the county to do this universally."

The coronavirus pandemic thrust most aspects of society into a socially distant, online environment, making internet connections even more critical for school and work. The coalition wants the county to provide universal internet access for all residents at a low cost as a long-term solution to connectivity woes many residents experience.

How the county would provide universal internet access hasn't been proposed in detail. Instead, the coalition sees the upcoming franchise agreement with cable operators as a starting point to improve connectivity across the county and resolve the issues people are experiencing during the pandemic.

Some residents sit in their car for hours so their children can connect to a retailer's Wi-Fi, said Julie Carlson, an Anne Arundel Connecting Together member and congregant at First Presbyterian Church of Annapolis.

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Residents without the means to afford faster internet and those who live in parts of the county without access must go to immense lengths to stay connected or otherwise fall behind.

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Internet connections in households — especially those with weaker connections — are strained as parents and children use the internet for work, school and entertainment. Sometimes all at the same time. Unemployed workers must file jobless claims on an online portal and need the internet to apply for jobs.

Morgan Binnix, a librarian at Anne Arundel County Public Library in Edgewater, said Thursday she's seen a constant flood of people requesting to use or rent computers as users keep their businesses afloat and their children educated.

To keep up with the demand, county libraries have begun offering Wi-Fi hot spots that extend to cover

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Heaven White, a resident of Harbor House in Eastport, said students in the neighborhood are often sitting together in apartment staircases or outside the few houses with a private cable provider trying to connect to their classes. As cold winter months loom, White, who is also taking online courses, says her internet cannot hold up.

“The service is just not sufficient enough to be able to maintain,” White said as her video and audio glitched on Zoom.

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