WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2020 REGULAR SESSION

ENROLLED

Committee Substitute

for

House Bill 4619

BY DELEGATES HANSHAW (MR. SPEAKER), CAPITO,
ATKINSON, WESTFALL, QUEEN, NELSON, SUMMERS, J. KELLY,
BARRETT, BOGGS AND MILEY

[Passed March 7, 2020; in effect ninety days from passage.]
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AN ACT to amend the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, by adding thereto a new section, designated §24-2-1o; to amend and reenact §31G-4-5 of said code; and to amend said code by adding thereto a new section, designated §31G-4-5a, all relating to broadband enhancement; excepting certain middle-mile fiber broadband infrastructure from consideration as a public utility; making legislative findings; defining terms; establishing the Middle-Mile Fiber Broadband Infrastructure Expansion Program; authorizing certain electric utilities to participate in said program; setting forth powers and duties of the Public Service Commission in reviewing and considering written plans and amendments thereto submitted pursuant to said program; requiring certain electric utilities to file written plans and application with the Public Service Commission upon a determination by the Broadband Enhancement Council that a proposed project is feasible; establishing that such a written plan and application is in lieu of a proceeding pursuant to §24-2-11; setting forth the required contents of said written plan and application; requiring that an electric utility publish in certain publication areas the anticipated monthly and yearly electric rate increase, if any, and actual rates under the proposal, as a Class I legal advertisement in compliance with the provisions of §59-3-1, et seq. of this code; requiring that a public hearing be held within 90 days of the publication of said notice; setting forth instances when no such public hearing is necessary; requiring that the Public Service Commission issue a final order within 150 days of the application filing date; setting forth instances when the Public Service Commission must approve such a written plan; authorizing an electric utility to implement such a plan upon approval by the Public Service Commission; setting forth project costs that an electric utility is entitled to recover as part of the implementation of an approved project; authorizing an electric utility to make certain accounting accruals; providing that electric utilities shall control the scope, scheduling and execution of a project; authorizing an electric utility to reestablish electric service and assure safety of its workers prior to restoration of middle-mile fiber broadband service;
Enr. CS for HB 4619

authorizing electric utilities to use contractors chosen by the electric utility to construct, install, operate, maintain and repair middle-mile fiber assets; providing an electric utility with sole control of the location and method of attachment and connection of certain middle-mile fiber infrastructure; requiring electric utilities to manage and document the entities that lease middle-mile fiber assets for last-mile operations; allowing an electric utility to own, manage, or control certain broadband capacity, fiber strands, equipment and electronics; allowing an electric utility to lease certain broadband capacity, fiber strands, equipment and electronics to certain Internet service providers and other third parties; allowing an electric utility to provide access points that are outside the electric utility’s power supply zone to allow connection between the electric utility’s broadband capacity system or fiber strands and non-governmental Internet service provider’s or other third party’s system; removing certain references to underserved areas of the state from feasibility studies of proposed broadband projects; and authorizing certain electric cooperatives to utilize their distribution system, poles, or rights of way to provide for critical infrastructure.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

CHAPTER 24. PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION.

ARTICLE 2. POWER AND DUTIES OF PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION.

§24-2-1o. Middle-Mile Fiber Broadband Infrastructure Expansion Program.

(a) Legislative findings. The Legislature finds:

(1) That access to broadband services is of critical importance to and a necessary prerequisite for enabling economic development in the state and for improving education, health care, public safety and government services, among other benefits to its citizens;
(2) That broadband expansion into unserved rural areas of the state continues to be an issue of importance to the Legislature, and progress is hindered by lack of full development of middle-mile broadband fiber infrastructure within the state;

(3) That the issues which have hindered the provision of broadband access to rural areas of the state especially disadvantage the elderly and low-income households;

(4) That it continues to be a primary goal of the Legislature to make every municipality, community, and rural area in this state accessible to Internet communications through the expansion, extension, and general availability of broadband services and technology;

(5) That regulated electric utilities have existing distribution infrastructure in place throughout the state, and that their existing and new infrastructure could be utilized in connection with construction of middle-mile broadband fiber assets;

(6) That it is in the public interest to expedite construction of middle-mile broadband fiber infrastructure to provide the necessary architecture to facilitate additional broadband Internet access to individuals and institutions in unserved areas of the state; and

(7) That it is appropriate to establish a program to allow electric utilities to construct middle-mile fiber broadband assets within the power supply zone utilizing existing and new electric utility distribution assets in a manner that addresses the needs of the public and is consistent with the operational concerns of the electric utilities that may participate in this program.

(b) Definitions. For purposes of this section:

“Commission” means the Public Service Commission of West Virginia.

“Council” means the Broadband Enhancement Council, as defined in §31G-1-1, et seq. of this code.

“Electric utility” means any electric utility operating within this state that is regulated by the commission: Provided, That an electric utility that has installed middle-mile fiber broadband infrastructure pursuant to this section shall not be considered a public utility engaged in the
transmission of messages by telephone, telegraph or radio for purposes of §24-2-1(a) of this code.

"Program" means the Middle-mile fiber Broadband Expansion Program established pursuant to subsection (c) of this section.

"Project" means one or more middle-mile fiber infrastructure expansion projects, including any portion of such projects to be used for the electric utility's communication needs, proposed by an electric utility and approved by the commission pursuant to subsection (e) of this section as part of the program.

"Served" means any area with broadband service as defined in §31G-1-2 of this code.

"Unserved" means any area without broadband service as defined in §31G-1-2 of this code.

(c) Establishment of program. Commencing July 1, 2020, the Middle-Mile Fiber Broadband Infrastructure Expansion Program is hereby authorized and established.

(d) Authorizing participation. An electric utility having distribution infrastructure in this state may participate in the program pursuant to the provisions of this section.

(e) Powers and duties of Public Service Commission to act on written plans and amendments to written plans. The commission shall have the following powers and duties in connection with the program:

(1) Review, approve, or reject each written plan submitted by an electric utility pursuant to subsection (f) of this section. A written plan shall be approved if the commission determines that the proposed plan is reasonable, prudent, useful, and is not contrary to the public interests, considering the interests of the potential broadband users and the electric utility customers.

(2) Review, approve, or reject amendments to written plans submitted by an electric utility pursuant to subsection (f) of this section. Amendments to a written plan shall be approved if the commission determines that the proposed amendments to a written plan are reasonable, prudent,
useful and not contrary to the public interest considering the interests of the potential broadband
users and the electric utility customers.

(3) Perform any other duties necessary to effectuate the provisions of this section.

(f) Written plan. Following the council’s determination that construction, installation, operation, and repair of a middle-mile broadband infrastructure expansion project by an electric utility is feasible pursuant to §31G-4-5 of this code, the electric utility shall file a written plan and application seeking the commission’s approval of the project and its associated cost recovery. The written plan and application is in lieu of a proceeding pursuant to §24-2-11 of this code and shall contain the following:

(1) The route of the middle-mile fiber infrastructure proposed for the project, the number of fiber strands that would be utilized in connection with the proposed project and dedicated to serve as the middle-mile, the location of the electric utility’s distribution infrastructure that will be utilized in connection with the proposed project, the capacity or number of fiber strands of the middle-mile that will be available to lease to non-governmental last-mile broadband Internet providers and other third parties upon completion of the proposed project, and the commitment of at least one non-governmental last-mile broadband Internet provider that will lease access to the middle-mile fiber assets constructed as part of the proposed project, and an estimate of potential broadband customers, determined in consultation with the council, that would be served by the middle-mile infrastructure;

(2) The estimated cost of the proposed project, including, but not limited to, engineering costs, construction costs, permitting costs, right of way costs and a reasonable allowance for funds used during construction;

(3) Proposed schedule of construction of the proposed project;

(4) Method of attachment and connection of the middle-mile broadband fiber assets to the electric utility’s distribution infrastructure;
(5) Testimony, exhibits or other evidence that demonstrates the project is reasonable, prudent, useful and not contrary to the public interest;

(6) A cost recovery mechanism that allocates all net costs to be recovered under this section on a distribution-level basis; and

(7) Other information the applicant considers relevant or the commission requires.

(g) The electric utility shall publish, in the form the commission directs, which form shall include, but not be limited to, the anticipated monthly and yearly electric rate increase, if any, and actual rates under the proposal, by average percentage and dollar amount for customers within a class of service, as a Class I legal advertisement in compliance with the provisions of §59-3-1 et seq. of this code, the publication area to be each county in which service is provided by the electric utility, a notice of the filing of the application and that the commission shall hold a hearing on the application within 90 days of the notice; unless no opposition to the plan or the rate change is received by the commission within the time limits established by the commission, in which case the hearing can be waived, and the commission shall issue a final order within 150 days of the application filing date: Provided, That upon the request of any interested person or entity, the commission shall allow for the submission of comments on the feasibility of the plan.

(h) Upon notice and hearing, if required by the commission, the commission shall approve the plan and allow expedited recovery of costs related to the expenditures as provided in subsection (f) of this section if the commission finds that the expenditures and the associated rate requirements are just, reasonable, not contrary to the public interest, and will allow for the provision and maintenance of adequate, efficient, safe, reliable and reasonably priced middle-mile fiber broadband service.

(i) The council or the commission may not act to limit the number of last-mile broadband Internet providers eligible to be contracted to utilize the middle-mile fiber infrastructure constructed as part of a project proposed pursuant to this section. No board, commission, agency, or other governmental body may regulate the costs extended to a broadband customer from any
last-mile broadband Internet service provider. Nothing in this subsection shall prevent the
commission from reviewing, modifying, and approving or denying the cost or means of providing
a middle-mile fiber proposed project pursuant to this section.

(j) Upon commission approval, an electric utility will be authorized to implement the plan
and to recover related project costs, net of any middle-mile broadband revenues or contributions
in aid of construction, as provided in the following:

(1) An allowance for return shall be calculated by applying a rate of return to the planned
net incremental increase to rate base attributable to the project for the coming year, considering
the projected amount and timing of expenditures under the project, plus any expenditures in
previous years of the project. The rate of return shall be determined by utilizing the rate of return
on equity authorized by the commission in the electric utility's most recent rate case proceeding
or in the case of a settled rate case, a rate of return on equity as determined by the commission,
and the projected cost of the electric utility's debt during the period of the project to determine the
weighted cost of capital based upon the electric utility's capital structure.

(2) Income taxes applicable to the return allowed on the project shall be calculated for
inclusion in rates at the federal and state statutory rates.

(3) Depreciation and property tax expenses directly attributable to the project shall be
estimated for the upcoming year.

(4) Operation and maintenance expense specifically and directly related to operation and
maintenance of the middle-mile fiber broadband facilities.

(5) Following commission approval of the project and related cost recovery mechanism,
an electric utility shall place into effect a commission approved reconcilable rate surcharge that
recovers the revenue requirement of the allowance for return, related income taxes, operation
and maintenance expenses, depreciation, property tax expenses associated with the electric
utility's estimated project investments for the upcoming year, net of middle-mile revenue or
contributions in aid of construction recovery of those costs provided by last mile broadband
Internet providers upon completion of the project, if any ("middle-mile cost recovery rates"). In each year subsequent to the order approving the project and middle-mile cost recovery rates, the electric utility shall file a petition with the commission setting forth new proposed middle-mile cost recovery rates that recover the revenue requirement of the project investments previously installed and projected costs of the project based on investments to be made in the subsequent year, plus any under-recovery or minus any over-recovery of actual costs attributable to the project, for the preceding year.

(k) The electric utility may make any accounting accruals necessary to establish a regulatory asset or liability through which actual costs incurred and costs recovered through the rate mechanism are tracked.

(l) Construction, installation, operation, maintenance, and repair of middle-mile fiber expansion projects. Subject to continuing authority of the commission to determine the reasonableness of acts and practices, for all projects contained in a written plan approved by the commission pursuant to subsection (e) of this section, and constructed, installed, operated, maintained, and repaired by an electric utility pursuant to this section, the electric utility shall have control of the scope, scheduling and execution of the project to construct, install, operate, maintain and repair middle-mile fiber assets, including fiber build route selection and build and splice schedules. The electric utility shall be entitled to reestablish electric service and assure safety of its workers prior to restoration of middle-mile fiber broadband service in order to ensure operational safety matters of the shared infrastructure. Additionally, the electric utility shall be entitled to use contractors chosen and approved by the electric utility to construct, install, operate, maintain, and repair middle-mile fiber assets pursuant to this section because of its or electric utility’s knowledge of hazards in the power supply zone and the associated controls to reduce the risks involved. Nothing in this section confers any rights to work in the power supply space except by the electric utility and its designated contractors.
(m) Attachment and connection of middle-mile fiber assets. An electric utility participating in the program shall have sole control of the location and method of attachment and connection of middle-mile fiber assets to the electric utility’s distribution infrastructure, unless otherwise ordered by the commission.

(n) Management of fiber projects. In order to manage operations, an electric utility participating in the program shall manage and document the entities that lease middle-mile fiber assets for last-mile operations, including, but not limited to, outage notification and management.

(o) Notwithstanding anything in this code or in the articles of incorporation of an electric utility to the contrary, an electric utility may, either directly or indirectly or through an affiliate or subsidiary, pursuant to a written plan approved by the commission:

1. Own, manage or control any broadband capacity, number of fiber strands, equipment and electronics, including any plant, works, system, lines, facilities or properties, or any part or parts thereof, together with all appurtenances thereto, used or useful in connection with the provisions and extension of such broadband services;

2. Lease such broadband capacity, number of fiber strands, equipment, or electronics to non-governmental Internet service providers and other third parties, on a nonexclusive basis; and

3. Provide access points that are outside the electric utility’s power supply zone to allow connection between the electric utility’s broadband capacity system or fiber strands, and any non-governmental Internet service provider’s or other third party’s system.

CHAPTER 31G. BROADBAND ENHANCEMENT AND EXPANSION

POLICIES.

ARTICLE 4. MAKE-READY POLE ACCESS.

§31G-4-5. Electric power utilities; feasibility study for providing broadband services; Public Service Commission to assist; proposed legislation to be developed; report.

(a) For purposes of this section:
(1) “Commission” shall mean the West Virginia Public Service Commission.

(2) “Council” shall mean the Broadband Enhancement Council, as defined in §31G-1-1 of this code.

(3) “Electric utility” shall mean any electric utility operating within this state that is regulated by the commission.

(4) “Project” shall mean a middle-mile broadband infrastructure expansion project proposed by an electric utility.

(b) Each electric utility may investigate the feasibility of constructing and operating a project within the electric utility distribution system and, if it so elects, may submit a feasibility study of a proposed project to the council on or before December 1, 2019. Additional feasibility studies may be submitted to the council after December 1, 2019, without penalty.

(c) The council and the commission shall assist each such electric utility in its preparation of such a feasibility study.

(d) The feasibility study shall include an evaluation of the following:

(1) The scope of the proposed project for which the feasibility study is conducted, which shall include, but not be limited to:

(A) The route of the middle-mile infrastructure proposed for the project, the number of fiber strands that would be utilized in connection with the proposed project and dedicated to serve as the middle-mile, the location of the electric utility’s distribution infrastructure that will be utilized in connection with the proposed project, the capacity of the middle-mile broadband infrastructure that will be available to lease to last-mile broadband Internet providers upon completion of the proposed project;

(B) The estimated cost of the proposed project, including but not limited to engineering costs, construction costs, permitting costs, materials and labor, right-of-way costs, and a reasonable rate of return to the electric utility;

(C) The proposed schedule of construction of the proposed project; and
(D) The method of attachment and connection of the middle-mile broadband fiber assets to the electric utility's distribution infrastructure;

(2) The regulatory and legal barriers to an electric utility constructing a project and operating middle-mile broadband infrastructure to provide access to unserved areas of the state, as defined in §31G-1-2 of this code, and proposed legislation to address such regulatory barriers;

(3) Whether it is in the public interest and the interest of the electric utility to make improvements to the distribution grid in furtherance of providing such middle-mile broadband Internet services in conjunction with its program of electric distribution projects;

(4) Whether it is in the public interest and the interest of the electric utility to operate middle-mile broadband Internet assets to provide access to unserved areas of the state;

(5) Whether it is in the public interest and the interest of the electric utility to permit a third party to lease such capacity to provide last-mile broadband Internet services to unserved areas of the state;

(6) Whether construction of middle-mile broadband Internet infrastructure utilizing electric utility distribution systems is feasible with respect to the maturity of the relevant technology, the compatibility of such services with existing electric services, and the financial requirements to undertake such project;

(7) The anticipated level of rate adjustment necessary to allow the electric utility to recover its costs associated with the proposed project, and a reasonable rate of return, on an expedited basis, that will be recovered by the electric utility through a rate adjustment at the commission; and

(8) Such other information that is pertinent to the project.

(e) Upon receipt of a feasibility study, the council shall post the same on the council website for written public comment for a period of seven days and then shall render a determination, by a majority vote of the council, as to the feasibility of the proposed project.
(f) In its consideration of the feasibility of a project, the council shall identify one or more last-mile broadband Internet providers that may lease the middle-mile broadband Internet capacity created by the proposed project pursuant to lease terms and conditions set by the council.

(g) The council shall render such feasibility determination within 60 days from the date the feasibility study is submitted to the council.

(h) Commencing January 1, 2020, and each year thereafter, the council shall give a report of its consideration of feasibility studies submitted pursuant to this section to the Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Delegates, and the Joint Committee on Government and Finance.


An electric cooperative organized pursuant to state and federal law, including the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, may utilize its distribution system, poles, or rights of way to provide for critical infrastructure, which may include the construction or operation, or both, of a broadband infrastructure project consisting of middle mile or last mile services, or both.
The Joint Committee on Enrolled Bills hereby certifies that the foregoing bill is correctly enrolled.

Moore Crats
Chairman, House Committee

Mark Maynard
Chairman, Senate Committee

Originating in the House.

In effect ninety days from passage.

Steve Farmer
Clerk of the House of Delegates

Joe Cinca
Clerk of the Senate

Lawrence Thomas
Speaker of the House of Delegates

Mitch E. Carmichael
President of the Senate

The within is approved this the 25th day of March, 2020.

James Justice
Governor