Broadband Testimony
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PA Route 6 Alliance

The PA Route 6 Alliance is the managing entity for the PA Route 6 Heritage Corridor. The PA Route 6 Alliance, a 501(c3) corporation, was established in 2003 to manage the PA Route 6 Heritage Corridor and to implement the Management Action Plan, branding and marketing plans, community development programs and other planning efforts along the corridor. The Alliance includes representatives from all 11 counties, 9 convention and visitor bureaus, 4 heritage areas, local development districts, local business owners, Chambers of Commerce and other interested parties along the corridor.

Through the leadership of the PA Route 6 Alliance, citizens from 11 counties are joining together to preserve, enhance and promote the treasured resources that contribute to their shared sense of place. Using the corridor's strategic Management Action Plan as their guide, they are initiating heritage tourism development strategies that will build more sustainable local economies and enhance the quality of life in every community along Pennsylvania Route 6.

The PA Route 6 Alliance has 6 areas of concentration. All intended to help make the Route 6 Corridor a memorable experience, a great place to visit and an even better place to live.

- Tourism Promotion
- Cultural Conservation
- Education and Interpretation
- Open Space and Recreation
- Economic Development
- Partnerships

Broadband accessibility was a concern in our original Management Action Plan in 2003 and now 12 years later, it still is mentioned in our revised plan.

For the rural destination marketing organizations (DMO's), it is a challenge to compete with the big cities and their promotional budget. For the last 20 years, social media has helped to somewhat level the playing field. With Facebook and Instagram being the technological equivalent to word-of-mouth marketing, it is crucial that small DMO's and tourism assets be able to monitor what is being said by their visitors as well as promote their events and attractions. The use of video and instant "live" feeds through social media is gaining in popularity, requiring more bandwith for uploading. For example, we just did a "live" feed for a ribbon cutting ceremony for our PA Route 6 Artisan Trail Exhibit and an unveiling of a Route 6 throw. While an Erie TV channel did not send a reporter, they picked up our live feed and edited down to a :30 second piece on the event. These activities are dependent on having internet access or in our case, a hotspot from someone's cell phone.

Visitors now have an expectation to be able to find wifi or to have reliable cell service so they can be their own hotspot. It's not all a blessing as we have become a culture of people staring at our phones or tablets. But there is a need for our communities to offer those services so that they are competitive in attracting visitors, new residents and new businesses.

Another challenge in the rural parts of Route 6 is wayfinding and navigation. While in the perfect world, PA Route 6 would have a defined wayfinding system leading our travelers to the locations they desire. This type of system is expensive to implement and maintain; but it is also a massive undertaking for the size of our Heritage Area (11 counties). We are fortunate to have a mile marker system in place for the 427 miles, but we must rely on GPS to also guide our travelers . In some of our areas, GPS is not reliable or there is no cell access so the GPS is dropped. This frustrates travelers and has a negative impact on their experience.

We all still are hoping for improvements in this area. Most DMO's use geo-coordinates in their members' and assets' listings on their website as will our new website, which is about to be launched. Most websites are also designed to be mobile responsive so that can be easily viewed on laptops, tablet and cell phones. All these advances in marketing a destination are happening because the public is demanding it, which means that they are relying more on their electronic equipment in their daily operations and travel.

 Along US Route 6 in Pennsylvania, many of the businesses and accommodations are still small, family-operated establishments. Technology needs to be consistent and easy to use. Their patrons and guests expect to find them easily, have access to additional information and reviews, be able to share their experience through posts, and pay with a credit card. This all requires an infrastructure that supports electronic transmissions and dependable internet access.

I would like to share with you a comment from the owner of a popular retail and attraction along Route 6 in Potter County about some of his frustrations:

> As a owner/operator of a retail store I can tell you that consistent broadband service is extremely important. I use an iPad POS which tracks inventory and runs card processing over the internet. Both require consistent communication back and forth in order to operate properly. The only choices I have for broadband are the Satellite providers (which I have tried both and they do not meet our needs) and Verizon 4G LTE Data from a cell phone...and that wasn't an option until Verizon switched to an unlimited data (which at the time of me writing this is not working properly). In addition to daily operations, we have customers who would love to be able to utilize a WiFi connection while the pass through the area. I have had several over the past few years stop by because their GPS drops out and they cannot connect to their navigation. I help them out best I can but again a broadband option would be extremely beneficial to not only to me but all of my customers as they stop by.
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> -   Keith Chase, Owner, Black Forest Trading Post and Deer Park

More of our small business owners are relying on Point of Sale (POS) systems that require consistent, reliable services. The strength of our Artisan Trail is helping talented people remain in the rural setting they love and still make a living. This requires that they be able to sell their masterpieces in their studios and galleries with a good POS system and also through e-commerce sites like Etsy.

Is broadband needed everywhere? Is it better for the communities to have broadband so they can thrive economically? It's hard to say, but times are changing and we are more reliant on internet access for all types of data transmissions. Even in the last 15 years since our first Management Action Plan was completed, we have seen vast improvements. We have also seen many advances in technology that are impacting our marketing, our communities and our economies. We need to stay up on the advances if we want to succeed.