

# The Times Herald

## Bill Tracker: Bringing net neutrality back to Pennsylvania

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Each legislative session thousands of bills and amendments are introduced in the Pennsylvania Legislature. Only a fraction become law, and an even smaller portion receive wide media coverage.

These bills impact the lives of people living in Pennsylvania every day. Each week The Sentinel will highlight one bill that has not received widespread attention.

When net neutrality advocates lost a fight at the Federal Communications Commission in December 2017, states entered the battlefield. One bill supporting net neutrality in the Pennsylvania Legislature would have the state join the fight in opposition to the Trump administration.

Net neutrality is the principle that internet providers like AT&T or Verizon must act in a manner analogous to phone service providers, which provide the same connection regardless of who is calling. Some computer scientists and security experts worry that without net neutrality a small number of internet service providers could block or delay content they don't like.

In response to those concerns, an Obama-era regulation forbade internet providers from blocking or slowing websites or offering faster speeds to websites willing to pay more.

However, net neutrality also has opposition from the telecommunications giants and free market advocates, who say it could increase costs that providers pass along to consumers. They also argue the policy is unnecessary because internet service providers would likely take a public relations hit if they deliberately slowed internet speeds.

In December 2017, the Trump-era Federal Communications Commission rescinded the net neutrality rules by a 3-2 party-line vote.

This led California and several other states to pass their own net neutrality bills. As of May 2019, there had been net neutrality bills or resolutions introduced in 29 states, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

However, state bills that have passed have run into still-ongoing legal disputes with the Trump administration over whether states can legally contradict FCC policy with their own net neutrality regulations.

Rep. Elizabeth Fiedler's Pennsylvania bill would prohibit internet service providers from blocking or impairing lawful internet content or giving preferable treatment to content. It would also define internet service providers as public utilities, granting the Public Utility Commission authority to enforce the net neutrality law.

"Most people get their internet access from a handful of big companies, including AT&T, Comcast and Verizon. Under current law, the company you pay for your internet service could prevent you from going to a competitor's website, interfere with speech that criticizes the company, or even block your access to a union website during a labor conflict at work," Fiedler said in a news release. "We rely on the internet for so much of our communication with work, school, government and family, and for financial transactions including purchases and bill paying. We need to protect our equal access to information on the internet."

Of course, state bills also run into opposition from opponents of net neutrality. For example, the libertarian Cato Institute blasted a 2018 Pennsylvania Senate bill, saying it would financially handcuff internet service providers and likely lead them to raise costs or reduce efforts to upgrade their networks.

Fiedler's bill has not received a committee vote in the Republican-controlled House.