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Could free internet service go away?

Julie Wendorf, director of the Crown Point Community Library, holds up a book at the library on Feb. 21, 2025. Local libraries are warning that the federal E-Rate program may face cuts or have its funding effectively eliminated under a recent proposal. **JOHN SMIERCIAK/POST-TRIBUNE**

Local libraries sounding alarm that program may be hampered by proposed federal cuts

By Meredith Colias-Pete
POST-TRIBUNE

When Northwest Indiana residents faced extensive power outages last month after a tornado and derecho, libraries welcomed them to use their free Wi-Fi.

Established by Congress in 1996, the Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate program helps libraries and schools eliminate 20%-90% of their internet costs. Back then, only about 14% had internet access, compared to nearly all today, according to NPR.

Now, local libraries are sounding the alarm that the E-Rate program may face cuts or effectively end funding under a recent federal proposal — which could force libraries to find community programs to cut, for example, to cover that expense.

"The FCC is trying to defund library internet," the Lake County Library wrote last month on its Facebook page.

"After the recent storms, we've seen huge crowds flock to the library to get online. We've seen the cars huddled in our parking lots to take advantage of our after-hours wifi. We know this is a vital service we provide to our community," it added. "The FCC, however, needs to be convinced."

They are encouraging residents to speak up for the E-Rate program by filing a public comment through the FCC's website by Oct. 13. It encouraged patrons to use a template from the American Library Association's website, but also to share their own experiences.

At the Lake County Public Library, the E-Rate program provides an 80-90% discount on their internet — covering about $190,000 at nine locations, Executive Director Carol

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LAKE COUNTY

Council set to vote on deal this week

Eagle Creek Township economic development plan's scope reduced

By Maya Wilkins
POST-TRIBUNE

A controversial economic development agreement for south Lake County is moving forward with the Lake County Council.

At its Tuesday meeting, the council will vote on the agreement affecting Eagle Creek Township near Lowell, located at the intersection of Interstate 65 and State Road 2.

The Lake County Plan Commission approved the agreement at an Aug. 27 special meeting. The county redevelopment commission made changes to prune areas of the map after some members wanted to preserve nearby residential and natural spaces.

"We took out a couple areas that had some housing in it," Executive Director of Lake County Community Economic Development Tim Brown said at the council's Thursday study session. "Another one had some wetland areas in it. It's about 850 acres less than what we originally planned."

Originally, Brown said the area was about 6,000 acres. The western boundary will be at about Mississippi Street and run to Grand Boulevard on the east side. It will start at about 153rd Avenue in the north and end on the south side of South Lake Stone quarry.

The area includes an incoming John Deere distribution center, Brown said Thursday. Anything the center brings in will bring the value of the area up, he added.

Brown said the county wants to get the agreement done by the

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Brooke Weaver and her daughter Elizabeth, 8, hand out pencil pouches Thursday during the Boeing Liftoff for Learning school supply giveaway at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana's new Tolleston Opportunity Campus in Gary. The giveaway, part of Boeing's employee-led community engagement program, helps students start the school year ready to learn. **ANDY LAVALLEY/FOR THE POST-TRIBUNE**

'The best part of my job'

Boeing workers give school supplies to 150 kids at Boys & Girls Club in Gary

By Doug Ross
FOR THE POST-TRIBUNE

Bernice Billups was trying to explain what she gets out of handing out free school supplies when a young girl came up to her, smiling, and shook her hand to say thanks.

"This handshake and hug, you can't pay for that," Billups said.

Billups, executive director of the central region for Boeing space advocacy and global engagement, enjoys visiting the John Will Anderson Boys & Girls Club in Gary every year.

"I've been with Boeing 25 years. This is the absolute best part of my job," she said.

"Liftoff for Learning is an annual school supply drive," Billup explained, in which Boeing employees donate money, matched by the company, to go to school supplies.

This year, they raised funds for composition books, spiral notebooks, pencils, crayons, markers, glue sticks, folders, backpacks and more for a total of 750 kids in Gary and Chicago. "Every school supply you can think of, we're supplying it," Billup said.

Boeing has been doing this for over 40 years. It's one of the two enterprise-wide drives the company sponsors. "Wherever Boeing has a presence, we are supporting students in that community," she said.

"This is the best part of my job, being able to see the direct impact of our personal dollars matched by the company," Billup added.

After the Aug. 11 derecho that devastated Gary and left many residents without power for weeks, "It just warms my heart to be able to do something like this."

Gary's Boys & Girls Club is part of the Tolleston Opportunity Campus, which includes the Gary YMCA and a Methodist Hospitals clinic. Billup was impressed with the expanded Boys & Girls Club.

"This is a huge shout-out to the city of Gary and all of the generous philanthropy of companies and organizations to make this possible," she said. "You don't see this every day."

"It's clean, it's bright," and it has a Boeing STEM lab, including donated aircraft material to help with learning, Billup said.

"I am truly in a room of VIPs," she told teens who gathered for the second wave of school supply giveaways.

Sharaya, 13, is one of the recipients. "I'm really grateful. Somebody actually stole my last book bag," she said.

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Gary Works blast furnace reline complete, US Steel says

By Maya Wilkins
POST-TRIBUNE

U.S. Steel has completed the $350 million reline of Gary Works' blast furnace No. 14 — the largest blast furnace in the steel corporation's operating footprint.

The reline, which took about 100 days, according to an email from a U.S. Steel spokesperson, was controversial with Northwest Indiana activists, who have expressed their desire for greener technology at the Gary mill.

According to a Thursday U.S. Steel news release, the reline project took more than 1 million labor hours from employees and contractors and was completed with a "Zero Days Away Injury Rate." About 1,000 contractors were on-site each day.

The corporation's news release said the blast furnace's return to service "marks an important milestone for Gary Works" and reflects the company's continued commitment to investing in the facility's long-term competitiveness.

A crane works on blast furnace No. 14 at the U.S. Steel Gary Works plant in Gary on June 10. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

According to U.S. Steel, the reline ensures Gary Works' long-term ironmaking capabilities and continued production of "reliable, high-quality American-made steel."

"The return of Blast Furnace #14 is a great example of disciplined execution at U.S. Steel and is a testament to the skill, dedication and unwavering focus on safety demonstrated by our employees, contractors and partners," U.S. Steel President and CEO David Burritt said in a statement. "This investment positions Gary Works to continue serving customers, supporting American manufacturing, and creating value for years to come."

Funding for the $350 million reline came from a partnership with Japanese steelmaker Nippon Steel. According to a previous U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission filing, Nippon Steel plans to give at least $3.1 billion in capital investments to Gary Works, starting with $400 million in 2025. This year, the company planned to invest $900 million in the facility, followed by $800 million in 2027 and $1.1 billion in 2028.

On Dec. 22, 2025, the U.S. Steel Board of Directors approved the reline's funding. In September 2025, the board also approved a $200 million investment into the Gary Works' hot strip mill, which will help "optimize production costs and expand premium product offerings, including heavy gauge line pipe and automotive steel," according to Post-Tribune archives.

The reline included replacing the furnace's refractory lining and restoration of critical systems to support safe, reliable operation and extend its productive life, according to the release. Teams also did extensive

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