

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Cable (and weren't afraid to ask)

Who currently provides my cable service?

If you live in the Hills, your cable provider is Altice (formerly Cablevision), who markets their service under the Optimum brand. In addition, Verizon FIOS is currently available in four neighborhoods, namely Wynnewood, Cortland, Long Meadow and Crestmont, and will be activated in Pinevale by June of 2024.

Why is my cable service so bad?

Altice's cable service is currently provided over a Hybrid Fiber-Coaxial (HFC) network that was installed approximately 30+ years ago during the initial construction of The Hills. In this type of network, service is provided over fiber optic cables until it transitions to coaxial cable for delivery to neighborhoods and then to individual homes. Internet connectivity, both in terms of speed and performance, is limited by its weakest link, namely the coaxial cable to the home.

While this network was state-of-the-art when it was originally installed, the effects of direct buried cable, weather, water infiltration, landscapers and plain old time have taken their toll. The pandemic only made things worse, with everyone working, playing and studying from home. The current HFC network was never built in anticipation of this type of demand and capacity requirements.

So what's being done about it?

In early 2021, the Township Committee convened a public meeting with Altice to address these service issues. The result of that meeting was an action plan from Altice for some immediate (patch) fixes to the existing HFC network, and a longer-term commitment to provide Fiber-to-The Home connectivity throughout The Hills.

As the name implies, the fiber connection is extended all the way to an individual home, providing greater speeds and enhanced reliability. This represents a significant capital investment in our community, and Altice is willing to bear the full cost of this improvement.

Altice has indicated that, based on their internal studies, fiber availability increases a home's value by an average of 3.1%. Even in neighborhoods that already have a fiber alternative (e.g., Verizon FIOS), the presence of a second provider creates choice and more competitive pricing.

So when is this going to happen?

Altice, with the assistance of the Township Committee, has been meeting individually with each of the homeowners associations in the Bedminster section of The Hills to lay out their plan and seek each board's approval. Currently, 17 of the 21 associations have signed on, with the remainder still under discussion.

Those neighborhoods that have approved the plan and signed a written agreement with Altice have been scheduled for construction, which began in April of 2023. Construction will continue throughout this year, and those neighborhoods that sign on now will be added to the back-end of the construction schedule.

What do I need to do get fiber to my home?

Once your neighborhood association has approved the Altice upgrade and construction is finished, you'll receive notification directly from Altice that fiber service is now available to your home, along with an 800 number to schedule the upgrade. If you are a current Altice customer and choose to upgrade to the fiber network, and provided you maintain the same cable package, there is no charge for the upgrade. If you prefer to remain on the existing HFC network, no action is necessary on your part.

What can I expect if I choose to upgrade?

On the day of the upgrade, an installer will run a new fiber connection to your home from the closest cable pedestal in your neighborhood (those little green boxes that dot the landscape). A new penetration through an exterior wall may be required, as the fiber doesn't necessarily follow the current cable wiring (e.g., it doesn't terminate in a utility closet). The fiber will connect directly into a new Altice One box in your main living area, and all other devices in your home will connect via Wi-Fi to that box. The existing coaxial wiring in your home will no longer be used.

Why should I upgrade?

In addition to being able to subscribe to higher speed service (e.g., 1 Gb+), the fiber network should provide much higher reliability and better performance than the current system. All services - TV, internet and phone - will be available and delivered through this new fiber connection. In addition, while Internet service provided over HFC is asymmetrical (e.g., 100 Mbps download, 10 Mbps upload), the service provided over fiber will be symmetrical (e.g., 100 Mbps down and up) at no additional cost.

But I heard Verizon FIOS is better. Why can't I have that?

When Verizon approached the various neighborhood associations in the Hills about 15 years ago to install FIOS, only three approved them to do so, which is why it is currently available only in certain neighborhoods. Realize this was in an era when fiber was a luxury. Now reliable broadband service is a necessity.

Over the past decade, Verizon has not significantly expanded its FIOS footprint across the state of NJ. However, within the past 12 months, two neighborhoods in the Hills have been upgraded to FIOS, namely Cortland and Pinevale (available 6/24). No other neighborhoods in the Bedminster section of the Hills are currently scheduled to receive FIOS.

If you are not currently a FIOS subscriber, you can check to see if your home or building was previously wired for service. While Verizon may not be doing new buildouts, they are still doing new service activations for homes and buildings previously wired. You can check your service eligibility by entering your address here: <https://fios.verizon.com/order-now.html>.

Why don't we have a choice in providers? I want (fill in the blank).

The short answer is that cable providers across NJ (as well as throughout the country) often have, by default, exclusive territories stemming from the franchise agreements they maintain with each municipality.

Why is it this way? At the risk of being TL;DR, a bit of history. When cable franchise agreements were originally negotiated with municipalities some 40+ years ago, a town would grant certain rights to a cable provider in exchange for them making a significant investment in the capital and labor required to install a cable system - basically digging up streets and yards and laying coax. Towns across the country were under pressure at the time to get cable TV installed - remember, this is back in the days of seven local channels (2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13) and rabbit ear antennas. Once a town or territory was built out, and even if the franchise agreement was non-exclusive, there was little economic incentive for new providers to enter the market and compete with the incumbent. Congress attempted to address this virtual monopoly over the ensuing decade by passing the Telecommunications Act of 1996, but while the intent was to encourage competition and new market entrants, the results were far different.

Fast forward to the year 2000, and suddenly the cable TV infrastructure is being used to deliver broadband Internet. Only the cable guys and the telcos have a wire into your home, so they become the defacto providers, and a duopoly is created. The good news is, you get 500 channels and high speed Internet. The bad news, the providers know they can get away with ever increasing prices, because they are literally and figuratively the only game in town.

So what other options are available?

Fixed wireless internet is an alternative to terrestrial (wired) services. It is usually offered at \$50-\$60 per month, and while it cannot compete with fiber from a speed or latency perspective, it is a good alternative for those who just require basic Internet access. Wireless carriers including AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile are currently deploying this service in limited areas. For example, Verizon 5G Home Internet is currently available in certain areas of the Hills, and will be more generally available throughout the coming year. You can check for availability by going here: <https://www.verizon.com/home/internet>