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New York Times
British TV executives see opportunity – and money to be made – in bringing American cable-style clashes to their screens

Associated Press
'Big burden' for schools trying to give kids internet access

NBC News
If you build it, they will learn: Why some schools are investing in cell towers

Associated Press

Rogers Communications Inc. agreed to buy rival Shaw Communications Inc. in a C$20 billion ($16 billion) deal that would unite Canada's two largest cable providers and shake up its wireless industry. The C$40.50-per-share cash offer has the support of Shaw's board and isn't conditional on financing, the companies said Monday. The proposal represents a 69% premium over Shaw's most recent closing price.

The transaction represents the merger of companies controlled by two of Canada's most powerful business families, who have cooperated as well as competed over the years in the battle against telecommunications rivals Telus Corp. and BCE Inc. Rogers and Shaw have carved up, and sometimes traded, rival cable territories -- with Shaw focused on Canada's western provinces and Rogers dominating Ontario.

But Rogers has pulled far ahead of Shaw by virtue of its large wireless division, a business in which Shaw's Freedom Mobile unit is a distant fourth place in Canada. That's one reason Shaw's share price has fallen over the past five years. "This transaction will create long-term value for both companies' shareholders, and just as important, this transaction will ensure Canada's cable and wireless industry can support the significant capital requirements needed for 5G networks and the essential connectivity that rural Canadians desperately need," Rogers Chief Financial Officer Tony Staffieri said on a conference call with analysts.

Shaw Chief Executive Officer Brad Shaw and another director nominated by the Shaw family will join the Rogers board. The Shaw family will also become a

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Tribune News Service
AT&T expanding 5G and 5G+ to all customers on unlimited plans at no extra cost

USA Today
Trying to book a COVID-19 vaccine appointment? Facebook is launching a vaccine finder tool

Spotlight PA
Partisan Pa. websites masquerading as local news threaten trust in journalism, new report finds

Pennlive
Democrats recommend veterinarian to vie for open Senate seat

major shareholder in the combined company, with 60% of its shares in Shaw Communications being exchanged for 23.6 million Class B shares of Rogers. “Our families and our companies have known each other for many years and we hold similar values and philosophies,” Brad Shaw said. “For decades Rogers and Shaw have been friendly but intense competitors. But all the while we have respected each other, admired each other and learned from each other’s actions.”

Rogers said the deal would add to earnings and cash flow per share in the first year after closing and that cost savings would top C$1 billion annually within two years. Including debt, the transaction is worth about C$26 billion. Rogers has been trying to expand by acquisition recently, teaming up with Altice USA Inc. to launch a hostile bid last August for Quebec-based Cogeco Inc. and its subsidiary Cogeco Communications Inc.. Cogeco’s controlling Audet family repeatedly rebuffed the bid, and it collapsed in November.

In November, Toronto-Dominion Bank analyst Vince Valentini said Shaw might have the most upside potential over the ensuing 18 months if it were to merge with Rogers. The combined company would spend C$2.5 billion to build a 5G network in western Canada and C$3 billion on investments in network, service and technology, the companies said in a statement. Rogers’ western Canadian headquarters would be at Shaw’s current head office in Calgary. “We have been clear that greater affordability, competition, and innovation in the Canadian telecommunications sector are as important to us as a government as they are to Canadians concerned about their cell phone bills,” Canadian Industry Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said in an emailed statement. “These goals will be front and center in analyzing the implications of today’s news.” – ***Bloomberg***

Challenging cable companies on their home turf, both Verizon and T-Mobile used their respective investor events this past week to outline plans to extend their home broadband offerings. Verizon kicked things off on Wednesday, saying it will use its newly acquired C-band spectrum to help increase total wireless broadband services to nearly 15 million homes by the end of the year. Before that, however, it’s using existing spectrum to offer 5G Home in 10 more cities this month, bringing its total 5G Home markets to 28.

Here are the latest to be added: Cleveland, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; Omaha, Nebraska; Charlotte, North Carolina; Hartford, Connecticut; Kansas City, Missouri; as well as Cincinnati, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas and San Diego. The earlier 18 markets to get 5G Home are Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, St. Louis and St. Paul, as well as Arlington, Texas; and Anaheim, California.

Verizon at one point said it wanted to reach 30 million homes with its 5G Home internet service, but didn’t always attach a specific timeframe to that. Now, it says it will increase total fixed wireless internet services to 15 million homes by the end of 2021; 30 million by the end of 2023, and 50 million by the end of 2025. Among the advantages that Verizon touts about its 5G Home Internet: no data limits and no throttling; speeds up to 1 Gbps; plans that start at $50/month; and easy self-set-up, with no waiting for a cable installer.

For the past few years, Verizon worked to perfect the fixed wireless access (FWA) home broadband experience and get the product into a form factor that was self-installable. Late last year, the company reported that 70% of the people doing the self-install on the 5G Home product were completely successful and didn’t need assistance from a third party. Meanwhile, T-Mobile is gearing up to for a wider commercial launch of its home internet service in a couple of weeks. The “un-carrier” is targeting 7 million to 8 million subs in this category within five years.

The merger with Sprint created new opportunities for T-Mobile to improve the home broadband experience for consumers. While T-Mobile’s 5G network is

aimed at mobility, it's going to have plenty of capacity to serve millions of consumers in their homes, providing an alternative to cable, according to Dow Draper, EVP of Emerging Products at T-Mobile. "As we look at the market dynamics, we believe there's a huge opportunity to disrupt this space," as high-speed options are limited and consumer dissatisfaction with the incumbent cable providers is high, he said during the company's investor meeting on Thursday. It will be targeting rural markets, where choices are extremely limited or non-existent for consumers, but it's also looking to serve larger markets.

T-Mobile has been offering a pilot home internet service, primarily using LTE, where it accepted more than 100,000 customers and experienced demand that was far more than that, according to Draper. They've seen average customer usage in the hundreds of gigabytes per month, including about 20% of customers using more than 500 Gigabytes, and that's all on LTE. It plans to move out of the pilot later this month and expects serve over half a million customers by the end of this year, and significantly ramp up in 2022 and 2023, reaching 7 million to 8 million customers by 2025.

There was a time when AT&T sounded more bullish about using mid-band spectrum for FWA to serve homes, and while it's not completely ignoring the FWA segment, it's clearly banking on fiber to carry the heavy load and wireless where it makes sense. The large consumption that AT&T anticipates over the next five years will be hard to meet with a wireless-only solution, said Jeff McElfresh, CEO of AT&T-Communications. "That's why our hybrid fixed and mobile approach is … the appropriate strategy with our network architecture." – ***Fierce Wireless***

The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission has approved a measure requiring the state's utilities to modify their collection policies to offer extended payment plans to help those with past-due utility bills. The measure, approved by the commission on March 11, applies to all PUC-regulated electric, natural gas, water, wastewater, telecommunications and steam utilities. Depending on their income level, consumers will be able to obtain a repayment plan of 1, 2 or up to 5 years to address their arrearage, according to the commission.

Public Utility Commission Chairwoman Gladys Brown Dutrieuille introduced the motion, noting that public health and financial factors are still impacting consumers, businesses and utilities across the state, including continued COVID-19 infections, unemployment, and substantial past-due balances for utilities. She also recognized the increased vaccinations, the gradual improvement of the economy and state and federal assistance available for utility customers and others working to overcome the impacts of the pandemic, according to a press release. "In recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic, the commission's March 13 Emergency Order, and the accumulation of customer arrearages, it is appropriate for utilities and the commission to offer extended repayment terms to residential and small business customers," Dutrieuille's motion read.

With the added protections in place, the Public Utility Commission has lifted its order prohibiting disconnection of utility service for non-payment, effective April 1, 2021. Several additional payment plan options have been established:

- For residential customers with incomes below 250% of federal income guidelines (FPIG), a utility is required to offer a payment arrangement length of a minimum of 5 years while allowing the customer to agree to or request a shorter payment arrangement and the utility to agree to a longer payment arrangement. For residential customers with incomes between 250% and 300% of the federal guidelines, a utility is required to offer a payment arrangement length of a minimum of 2 years while allowing the customer to agree to or request a shorter payment arrangement and the utility to agree to a longer payment arrangement.

- For residential customers with incomes over 300% of the federal guidelines, a utility is required to offer a payment arrangement for a minimum length of 1 year while allowing the customer to agree to or request a shorter payment arrangement and the utility to agree to a longer payment arrangement.
- For small business customers, a utility is required to offer a payment arrangement for a minimum length of 18 months while allowing the customer to agree to or request a shorter payment arrangement and the utility to agree to a longer payment arrangement.

The federal income guidelines (FPIG) are used nationally to determine eligibility for numerous state and federal income-qualified programs and vary based on household size. “Additionally, utilities and the Public Utility Commission’s Bureau of Consumer Services may continue to use flexible means for income verification and business status information, including over-the-phone or via electronic mail, for the purpose of qualifying customers for payment arrangements and/or universal service programs,” the release stated.

Representatives from PECO and PA American Water previously told MediaNews Group the companies have seen higher numbers of delinquent bills during the pandemic, and have been communicating with customers in a variety of ways to let them know about the help available to them. Funmi Williamson, PECO’s chief customer officer previously said that the company has never seen the level of arrearages as this pandemic has created.

Under the measure, the utilities will submit quarterly reports to the commission for the rest of 2021 — detailing the number of accounts at risk of termination at the end of the month; the total aggregate dollars of arrears at the end of the month; and the number of accounts disconnected for non-payment with dollar amounts owed. The information will be separated by residential and commercial accounts and should include information about accounts enrolled in Customer Assistance Programs, if appropriate, according to the release.
– ***21st Century Media***

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