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It's that time of year again.

While people are gearing up to excitedly unwrap their Christmas presents, they're also cautiously opening up their latest cable bill. Inside, they won't find the latest electronic gizmo or even a pair of socks. Instead, they're being greeted with a rate increase.

**Washington Post**  
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Customers of the Lehigh Valley's two largest cable providers won't be spared from this annual New Year's greeting, a familiar tradition ever since cable rates were deregulated about two decades ago. For one, RCN of the Lehigh Valley is increasing the price of its most popular TV package, signature digital TV, by \$5, or 5.4 percent, to \$98.50. In addition, RCN is raising its broadcast TV surcharge by \$1.25, its sports surcharge by \$2.25 and its entertainment networks surcharge by \$2.50. Certain equipment fees also will increase up to \$3 monthly.

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Meanwhile, Service Electric Cable TV & Communications is raising the price of its most popular TV package, its full basic lineup, by \$5.50, or 6.4 percent, to \$91.99. Because those are just the price hikes for the most popular packages, customers should check their latest bill, which should include the annual rate increase letter, to find out exactly how much more they will pay in 2017. But, as everyone knows, rising cable prices are nothing new.

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According to the Federal Communications Commission's [annual report](#) on cable industry prices, the average cost of expanded basic service increased from \$43.04 in 2005 to \$69.03 in 2015. During that period, the price grew at an average annual rate of 4.8 percent, far outpacing the nation's rate of inflation, which grew annually at 2 percent over the same span, the FCC report states.

**Washington Post News**  
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The cable companies say their hands are tied. They blame the rising rates on programming costs — what they have to pay networks and broadcast stations to carry and distribute channels to viewers. In a notice to RCN customers, Sanford Ames Jr., senior vice president and general manager of RCN of Lehigh Valley, said those escalating costs comprise the company's single biggest expense category, forcing RCN to hike its rates to recoup a portion of the increase before absorbing the remainder.

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"It's sad because we're doing the best we can, and I just hope we can get it resolved," said Jack Capparell, general manager of Service Electric. "Each time we come up with this, it gets closer and closer to where you almost get to the point where you're going to go dark, like Dish and a lot of the other ones did, and maybe try to bring some attention to it."

According to the FCC report, cable systems paid an average of \$12.7 million in 2014 for retransmission consent fees, — a 63 percent increase from \$7.8 million a year earlier. But increased retransmission fees — and thus higher cable bills — are not the only reason cable companies are losing customers, according to Jeff Kagan, an Atlanta telecommunications industry analyst.

For one, Kagan said, cable companies continue to add more channels to their bundles even as a growing contingent of customers desire smaller bundles — and, consequently, a smaller bill. And, if the cable companies can't offer that at a low price, there are more alternatives out there than ever before. "The whole idea is the marketplace is made up of many slices," Kagan said. "One slice wants one bundle of services, and another slice wants another bundle. "There was no choice before, and now there's choice."

For one, AT&T on Nov. 30 launched its live TV streaming service called **DirecTV Now**, which offers packages that include 60 to 120 channels and monthly prices ranging from \$35 to \$70 through certain TV-connected devices. Other online live-TV services already include Sony's PlayStation Vue and Dish Network's Sling TV. In addition, customers can also get their entertainment fix through streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu. HBO and Showtime have also launched stand-alone, online streaming options of their network that don't require a cable or satellite subscription.

With more choice, more people are cutting the cord on cable. Market research firm **Gfk said in a July report** that one-quarter of all U.S. TV households are now without cable or satellite reception. "We're witnessing the early stages of a major industry-wide transformation in the cable television space," Kagan said. — **Allentown Morning Call**

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Connecticut will retain the final word on crowded utility poles.

The Connecticut Public Utilities Regulatory Authority has exercised jurisdiction over municipalities in approving requests over whether mobile providers can install small transmitters on utility poles as a means to improve coverage in neighborhoods. PURA had deliberated on the issue since last summer, when Greenwich officials filed a request with PURA to clarify whether it could have any say in a Verizon Wireless plan to install a "small-cell" transmitter on affluent Shore Road in Greenwich.

The move drew responses from Verizon and the Wireless Infrastructure Association trade group; as well as the city of Danbury, the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the Connecticut Council of Small Towns and the Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel.

The vast majority of utility poles in Connecticut are jointly owned by Hartford-based Eversource Energy and Norwalk-based Frontier Communications, which allow use of the poles by cable companies. The newest entities jostling to get space on the poles are mobile providers with low-power radios that can receive and send signals less than a mile but which can improve network capacity as much as 16-fold — a key criterion for wireless providers as more people and businesses rely on mobile apps for communicating and controlling devices, and possibly opening up avenues for new competitors to enter the market.

The small-cell systems have the added bonus of lessening the need for cell phone towers despised by property owners with a view of the towers. “Small cell wireless telecommunications facilities are a natural fill-in for the gaps from towers and rooftops, but if this option proves the path of least resistance in terms of cost and regulatory process, proliferation could clearly become an issue,” stated Katie DeLuca, Greenwich director of planning and zoning, in an August letter to PURA. “Four or more carriers, plus the incumbent landline cable and phone operators (Optimum and Frontier), plus new entrants such as Charter, Comcast, Google Fiber, Amazon and Facebook, all competing for the same customer base for their ‘fixed wireless’ offerings conjures up visions of a cacophony of clutter in our streetscapes.”

Verizon invoked the Federal Communications Commission in defending its small-cell installations, noting an order earlier this year emphasizing the importance of allowing wireless companies to install equipment. “Small cell utility pole attachments are exactly the type of wireless infrastructure the FCC contemplated,” argued Kenneth Baldwin, an attorney in the Hartford office of Robinson Cole representing Verizon Wireless. “Local bodies are not precluded from participating in the (PURA) regulatory process for authorizing small cell attachments ... through the initiated docket.” – **Connecticut Post (Bridgeport)**



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