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If you're a customer of Verizon Communications Inc. or AT&T Inc., you may see some larger numbers in the fine print this year.

Verizon has increased the price it charges subscribers to upgrade to a new device or add a phone to a new line. AT&T is nudging up the price of its unlimited data plans, which are no longer available but are still held by certain longstanding customers. Verizon increased its upgrade fee from \$20 to \$30 as of Jan. 5. This fee is paid whenever you buy a new phone from the carrier, at the full retail price or through one of Verizon's device payment programs. Verizon also upped its activation fee, for adding a phone to a new line, to \$30.



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spokeswoman for the carrier. However, enterprise and government customers don't have to pay the upgrade fee. If you buy a phone outside the carrier's retail operation—from Apple, for instance—you also skip the fee. (Just pop your SIM card into the new phone and your service will continue.)

Last July, Verizon increased the rates on all of its data plans by \$5 to \$10 a month, depending on the plan. More recently, it also introduced some cost-saving benefits such as rollover data and overage protection. Unlike AT&T, Verizon isn't raising the price of its grandfathered unlimited data plans so far this year. But it did increase the cost of those old unlimited plans by \$20 a month, over the last two years, Ms. Crummey said.

Verizon recently began to force heavy users of the legacy "unlimited" plan—those hitting the 200GB ceiling—to switch plans or leave the carrier. Those subscribers using more than 200GB of data have to select a new, data-capped service plan by Feb. 16 or their service will be disconnected, Ms. Crummey said. AT&T is levying a \$5 hike on people still on its old unlimited plans as of March, following a \$5 price increase last February. AT&T spokeswoman Emily Edmonds said the company hopes customers will move over to one of its newer data plans.

No matter what AT&T unlimited data plan you have, the company will slow down your data speeds for the remainder of your current billing cycle if you exceed 22GB of data. Verizon doesn't throttle data speeds for its few remaining unlimited-plan subscribers. — *Wall Street Journal*

The fee increase is a way for Verizon to help cover the ongoing cost of building out its cellular network, said Kelly Crummey, a

AT&T will soon test a new way to deliver high-speed internet that blends together new and old technology.

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The Dallas-based telecom company will start field trials for an approach that could bring internet to anyone on the electric grid by using power lines. The technology uses low-cost plastic antennas and devices placed on power lines so that the existing infrastructure is a guide for broadband signals. The power lines don't carry the signal, and no electrical connection is needed. The company has dubbed the effort Project AirGig.

By mid-2017, AT&T hopes to have the service running in a few test cities. It has not announced the locations, though company officials say they have heard from many cities that want to be a part of a trial. The innovation could eliminate some of the challenges and costs of expanding high-speed internet access, said Roger Entner, a telecom analyst at Recon Analytics. AT&T would not have to dig trenches for fiber or seek permission to use a right of way, he said. He called the approach a "fast and cheap and efficient way to get to customers." "Wherever there are power cables, this is a really competitive solution," he said.

AT&T is the second largest wireless carrier in the country with about 133 million wireless customers. Its fastest internet service, AT&T Fiber, is available in 46 metro areas, including Dallas-Fort Worth. AT&T plans to reach at least 67 metros with the service.

The technology used with Project AirGig could boost high-speed internet access in rural areas or low-income neighborhoods. And it could boost cities' broadband capacity as video streaming, virtual reality and self-driving cars increase demand. "What's a gamechanger is everywhere there's power, I can now give really advanced wireless service," said John Donovan, AT&T's chief strategy officer and group president of technology and operations. "What used to be uneconomical is now economical."

Donovan said it could cut AT&T's setup costs by 30 to 70 percent, depending on deals with utility companies. He said it could also decrease its use of competing carriers' infrastructure for backhaul -- one piece of connectivity -- in certain states. Donovan said ProjectAirGig could also have an upside for utility companies. It could alert them to potential problems, such as maintenance issues and tree branches on the lines. AT&T could also add new "smart" capabilities, such as new meters that monitor electricity use. He described the project as the latest milestone in the company's long history of innovation. AT&T has more than 200 patents or patent applications related to the project, including plastic antennas and devices that are placed along the power line to pick up signals.

AT&T has already tested the Project AirGig technology, but the field trials will help the company figure out things that are difficult to simulate, such as how the technology works when it rains or snows and how long it takes to restore service when a driver hits a utility pole, Donovan said. It's also a way to estimate the cost of deployment and the right price for customers. "You can do it [the testing] in a lab, and you can even do it outside at a lab, but the customers are the ones who are going to tell you whether it's fast enough and if it's the right price," he said. Donovan said he can't predict when customers may see Project AirGig in their backyards, "but the minute it goes in the field, we are going to be watching it and planning deployment." – *Dallas Morning News*

The best thing state leaders can do for Wisconsin's rural economy this year is commit more attention and resources to high-speed internet.

That message came through loud and clear during the fall election campaign, when dozens of candidates for the statehouse from across south-central Wisconsin met with the State Journal editorial board, seeking our endorsement. Voters were stressing the need for faster digital connections so local businesses could sell products around the globe, so schoolchildren could do their homework, and so farmers could operate high-tech equipment, the candidates told us.

Republicans and Democrats alike said they were committed to the effort. Now it's time for them to deliver.

Gov. Scott Walker recently proposed increasing funding for faster internet, called broadband, by \$35.5 million. That would be on top of \$16.5 million already committed. The state money will help encourage private investment and maximize \$570 million from the federal Connect America Fund II that's supposed to bring high-speed connections to 230,000 homes and small businesses across mostly rural areas of Wisconsin.

Broadband allows fast internet browsing, online commerce and video streaming that businesses need to sell products, and students need to access modern educational tools. For example, some school districts offer students access to online sites from home that track and challenge each student in reading and math, adjusting the lessons to their abilities. Teachers get instant reports on each child's online activities and performance.

AT&T, CenturyLink and Frontier have secured federal dollars to help improve and provide fast internet to large swaths of the state. The companies also are investing money of their own. AT&T; told State Journal business editor Larry Avila last week it invested about \$835 million in Wisconsin between 2013 to 2015 for communications infrastructure. Increasingly, companies are extending broadband to remote areas using wireless technology and existing cellphone towers.

It's not just a rural issue. Parts of Dane County still have weak and unreliable internet. And Madison officials are trying to provide fiber-optic internet service to more low-income residents. President-elect Donald Trump has talked about rebuilding America's roads, bridges and other infrastructure. He should add broadband to the list.

Rural voters, especially in Wisconsin, were key to helping Trump win the White House. If the Republican president-elect truly wants to help rural economies and promote job growth, keeping the Connect America Fund going strong will be key. So will including broadband in any federal building plan. Gov. Walker rejected millions of dollars in federal funding for broadband years ago. That was a mistake.

But with Republicans running Washington, the governor appears much more inclined to accept federal help. That's good. This shouldn't be a partisan issue. Wisconsin needs strong digital connections across the state to succeed in the global marketplace and to keep and attract more young people in smaller towns and cities. – **Madison (WI) State Journal editorial**



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