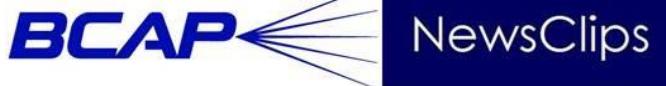


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January 13, 2020

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This week, Lancaster Watchdog explains why so many utility poles around Lancaster County are taped together. Hanging poles, broken poles, strapped polls — Watchdog has covered them all this year. One reader recently wrote about the issues of bundled poles and their potential dangers. That same reader added that the bundled poles “inhibit clear views when pulling onto roadways and otherwise are an eyesore.”

But why does this keep happening, and why aren’t the old poles immediately replaced? Well, it all has to do with the wires they’re meant to hold up. Every utility pole has a central owner, but other utility companies (usually cable companies) can install wires on those same poles if allowed.

Let’s take PPL, for instance. Many of its poles have multiple company cables attached. When poles break or need to be replaced, PPL moves over its cables seamlessly, but it can’t do the same for the other lines. “PPL is not authorized to move communication cables attached to our poles that are owned by other companies,” PPL spokeswoman Jessica Baker told Watchdog. “In order to stabilize the old pole until cables are moved, our workers will often support the old pole to the new pole to make it safe for the public.” That’s the bundling of poles that so many readers see.

So how is the message passed to other companies to move their lines? Baker said they all use a program called the National Joint Use Notification System. PPL registers every pole it owns onto the database, along with the companies with attached cables. Once PPL installs a new pole, a notification is sent through the system for companies to move their cables to the new pole. They are contacted one at a time to ensure the cables are replaced and attached in the same order as the previous pole, according to Baker.

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The changes could take months for all of the companies to move their cables over, but once it is done, PPL is notified through the National Joint Use Notification System to remove the old pole. – *Lancaster Online*

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The good news is, someday soon “triple play” will mean something only to baseball fans. These days, though, cable-TV customers probably still know it better as the industry’s torture device.

Triple-play bundles refer to long-term contracts with a company such as Comcast Corp. or Charter Communications Inc. that provide internet, television and landline-phone service for one “discounted” rate. These packages force you to have an old-school home-phone number, seemingly just for telemarketers to utilize, and dozens of TV channels you’ll never watch but will nevertheless subsidize. Meanwhile, all you really want is a fast internet connection to binge on Netflix and gain access to a handful of your favorite network shows.

But rejoice — there’s a movement afoot that may send triple-play bundles the way of the rotary telephone. Verizon Communications Inc. announced on Thursday that its Fios division is ending these aggressive you’ll-take-it-all-and-you’ll-like-it bundles, allowing subscribers to better customize their plans with what it’s calling Fios Mix & Match. Users can choose among three different internet-speed options that range from \$40 to \$80 a month and several TV packages that run anywhere from \$50 to \$90 a month. No annual contracts, it says, and no surprise fees — well, sort of! After all, this wouldn’t be the cable and phone industry if there weren’t some doozies contained in the fine print: Some of the options do have an additional fee for a set-top box or router. A home phone line is a separate \$20, to which you can kindly say, “no thank you.”

Verizon won’t be the last to give in and smash the bundle, at least for now. They’ve been in decline as an increasing number of customers switch to broadband-only service. There may be more than 50 million broadband-only U.S. homes by 2023, which would make up about half of all pay-TV households, according to research by Geetha Ranganathan and Amine Bensaid, analysts for Bloomberg Intelligence. To stem the drop in revenue, the cable giants have been pushing video add-ons, the analysts said. Charter, which acquired Time Warner Cable in 2016 to strengthen its business against cord-cutting, began offering a \$15-a-month skinny video bundle called TV Essentials last year.

Lest you, dear cable customer, believe that this is a sign the industry is finally listening, remember that we’re still nowhere near a true a la carte service. Verizon’s new Your Fios TV package for \$50 a month allows subscribers to pick five channels, while Verizon arranges the other 120 channels. How many customers wish they could just take the five and call it a day? Moreover, streaming-video apps won’t necessarily lead to lower monthly bills either: Verizon’s mid-rate internet option (with router), plus Disney+, Netflix and HBO Max would cost a combined \$110 a month (although Verizon is currently offering internet users a year of Disney+ free, and Verizon wireless customers can get other savings). My point is, the ideal video-app configuration may not be any cheaper than going for a triple play.

That's why bundles will live on, even if the traditional triple play won't. If anything, bundles will likely be back en vogue later this year. In November, I called for [The Great Rebundling](#), predicting that the cable giants — which have been benefiting from a surge in broadband signups — will next look to leverage their content distribution relationships by offering bundles for streaming apps and internet service at one rate. Apple Inc. and Amazon.com Inc. may seize similar content-bundling opportunities, which would at least help solve the consumer frustration of paying for apps individually in various places.

This is why, even as millions of customers have permanently abandoned cable-TV, sending media networks into a tizzy, the cable companies haven't even broken a sweat. Shares of Comcast rose 32% in 2019, and analysts see them climbing 13% in 2020. Charter's gain last year of 70% made it the leading media stock in the S&P 500 Index. Triple play will be reincarnated with a new cute name, and prices will eventually go up, and everyone will complain, and the cable industry will be as good as new. — *Bloomberg*

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The Federal Communications Commission plans to grant a request from AT&T and other ISPs to make more rural-broadband funding available for slower-speed services with lower data caps. FCC Chairman Ajit Pai [initially proposed](#) distributing \$20.4 billion in rural-broadband funding to ISPs offering three levels of service: an entry-level tier of 25Mbps download and 3Mbps upload speeds, with a data cap of at least 150GB a month; a mid-range level of 100Mbps down and 20Mbps up, with a data cap of at least 2TB per month; and a "gigabit performance" tier of 1Gbps down and 500Mbps up, with a data cap of at least 2TB.

But AT&T, Frontier, Windstream, and their industry lobby group [urged the FCC](#) to either lower the standards of the mid-range tier or add another tier that would be below the mid-range one. The FCC is complying, with an [updated plan](#) that it released yesterday and scheduled for a January 30 vote. Specifically, the FCC added a new tier of 50Mbps down and 5Mbps up, with a data cap of at least 250GB a month. The FCC also raised the planned cap on the lowest tier from 150GB to 250GB. AT&T and other ISPs had [pushed](#) for a cap of 150GB on both the 25/3 and 50/5Mbps tiers.

The FCC will use a reverse auction to distribute \$20.4 billion over 10 years to ISPs that bring service at the specified speeds and data caps to rural areas. The new program is called the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, and it will replace the existing Connect America Fund. Like all of the FCC's Universal Service programs, the new fund would be paid for by Americans through fees on their phone bills. In practical terms, adding the new tier means that some federal funding that would have gone to 100/20Mbps service with a generous 2TB data cap could instead go to 50/5Mbps service with a much stricter data cap of 250GB. It's also possible that 50/5Mbps projects will get some funding that would have otherwise gone to 25/3Mbps. However, the FCC said it expects to distribute funding for 25/3Mbps services "only in areas where higher speeds are not economical," which suggests the 50/5Mbps tier is likely to play a big role in the program. The overall pool of \$20.4 billion, or just over \$2 billion per year, is unchanged.

It would be better for Internet users if the 25/3Mbps and 50/5Mbps tiers required data caps larger than 250GB. That amount has been outdated for heavy Internet users for a long time—Comcast raised its data cap from 300GB to 1TB [in April 2016](#). A year ago, [research](#) by the vendor OpenVault found that US cable Internet customers were using an average of 268.7GB per month, and 4.1 percent of households were using at least 1TB. Median usage was 145.2GB per month. The caps won't remain at 250GB indefinitely, though. The FCC said it chose the amount because its Measuring Broadband America testing program recently found average monthly usage of 251.45GB per month. The FCC plan calls for updating the 250GB cap yearly based on the "average usage of a majority of fixed broadband customers." There's no proposed mechanism for automatically updating speeds each year, though.

Two groups that represent smaller ISPs previously urged the FCC to reject calls for slower speeds. NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association and ACA Connects (formerly the American Cable Association) [wrote](#) that "It would be remarkable 'backsliding' indeed... to adopt lesser standards—such as lower upstream speeds or entirely new, lower speed tiers." In explaining why it rejected the argument from small ISPs, the FCC said, "Adding a performance tier at 50/5Mbps furthers our goal of incentivizing providers to deploy networks that will deliver services that consumers need today as well as in the future, but also ensures minimum speed service will be available in the hardest to serve areas."

FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, part of the commission's Democratic minority, has been unsuccessfully pushing the Republican majority to adopt more forward-thinking speed standards. The 25/3Mbps entry-level tier is too low, she argues. Ten years ago, the FCC standard for measuring broadband deployment was a [mere 200kb per second](#), which sounds preposterous today. The FCC raised that standard to 4Mbps down and 1Mbps up in 2010 and to 25Mbps down and 3Mbps up [in 2015](#). Pai, who was then a commissioner but not the chair, voted against raising the standard to 25/3Mbps. The 200kbps standard used 10 years ago "is comically slow today," Rosenworcel [said in August](#). "But with this proposal we're taking today's standard and assuming it makes sense ten years hence. That's not right."

Rosenworcel is not impressed with the updated plan, either. In a statement to Ars, she pointed out that the FCC's broadband maps are inaccurate and said they should be overhauled before the FCC doles out \$20.4 billion. The FCC [voted to collect](#) more accurate data in August, but it could select the first auction winners before the government has a better idea of which parts of the country lack broadband. "The agency looks to be rushing its newest effort out the door before it even tries to fix the fundamental problems with its broadband maps," Rosenworcel told Ars this week. "Everyone knows how poor the agency's information is about where service is and is not. That's why we need maps before money and data before deployment."

The FCC plan says it can account for the data problems by splitting the funding distribution into two auction phases. The first auction, which would start later this year and distribute \$16 billion of the \$20.4 billion, would "target those areas that current data confirm are wholly unserved," the FCC plan says. "By relying on a two-phase process, we can move expeditiously to commence an auction in 2020 for those

areas we already know with certainty are currently unserved, while also ensuring that other areas are not left behind by holding a second auction once we have identified any additional unserved locations through improvements to our broadband deployment data collection," the plan says.

Pai said in an [announcement](#) Wednesday that "the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund would be the biggest step the FCC has taken to date to close the digital divide." The FCC this week said that about 6 million locations (i.e. homes and businesses) would be eligible for funding in the first auction phase but [previously said](#) that the project will "connect up to 4 million rural homes and small businesses."

In the reverse auction, the FCC will assign a weight to each tier, with the weights helping determine how much money an ISP gets for providing service at the specified speeds and caps. In good news, the FCC's weighting system favors higher-speed services. The FCC gives preference to speed tiers with lower weights—a zero weight is assigned to the gigabit tier, so ISPs that promise gigabit services should get more money for each location they serve.

The assigned weight for the 25/3Mbps tier is 50, which is unchanged from the initial proposal to the revision. In the initial plan, the 100/20Mbps tier's weight was 25, and that has been dropped to 20. The brand-new tier of 50/5Mbps with a 250GB data cap has a weight of 35. There are also latency standards. Services with latency of 100ms or less won't be penalized with a greater weight. Higher-latency services of up to 750ms will get an additional weight of 40, which means that traditional satellite services will be at a disadvantage compared to wired or fixed wireless services. The FCC rejected calls to require lower latencies. — *Ars Technica*

