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As Comcast's CEO looks ahead to a year likely to bring a rollback of industry regulations and a change-

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“Regulatory certainty for investors is the same as it is for management. It helps you have the confidence to make long-term plans,” Brian Roberts, head of the Philadelphia-based media giant, told investors Thursday morning during an earnings call. “The more uncertainty, the less encouraging it is to want to invest. We’re encouraged by the prospect of rules that we believe will encourage that investment and stimulate investment, whether that’s a tax decrease or revisiting the authority of the government to go to places that they said they weren’t going to but legally they could go into with the Open Internet Order.” The order is a key part of net neutrality regulations.

Roberts went on to say they're "looking forward to working with the new administration and regulatory leader," referring to Trump's pick for FCC Chairman, senior board Republican Ajit Pai, a vocal opponent of net neutrality and government regulations. CFO Mike Cavanagh said the corporate tax reforms many expect were not factored into the 2017 financial outlook, as the company remains in "wait and see mode."

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As Roberts and executives leading its cable communications and NBCUniversal divisions looked back on 2016 and ahead at 2017, other major factors also brought significant buzz: For the first time in 10 years, Comcast's cable division added video customers over all four quarters of a year in 2016, the company reported, with executives tying that consistent success with the continued adoption of its next-generation cable platform X1, a "real competitive differentiator," said Cavanagh.

At the start of 2016, 30 percent of Comcast customers had X1, which, among other interactive features, allows users to pull up live, On Demand, DVR and the recently-added Netflix content through a voice-controlled search in their homes. That number reached 48 percent of customers by the end of 2016, and executives see it rising above 60 percent of subscribers within the next year.

Ultimately, the company sees a ceiling of as many as 75 to 80 percent of customers using the X1 system. The increased adoption is key to Comcast's battle against the cost-conscious trends of cord-cutting and a reliance on OTT systems. Roberts said the system wasn't static, but is consistently being improved. So far the cable giant added a host of features to enhance the viewing of Rio Olympics coverage, integrated Netflix last fall and will soon bring in SlingTV. "Customers who have now had it for a couple of years, their churn, their reliability, their usage, and every way you study this thing it looks like a fantastic product, a game-changing product," said Roberts. "The results continue to keep us going."

Despite analysts repeatedly pushing for more details Thursday on the launch of Comcast's wireless service, Roberts remained tight-lipped and stuck to the company's previous statements — wireless will hit the market by the middle of the year and will be aimed at current customers to increase the value of their service bundles, improve retention and boost lifetime customer economics. CFO Cavanagh did disclose that the company expects a drag in cash flow in connection with the wireless launch and investment in handsets. He declined to specify an exact estimate.

Roberts also held fast to the company's intent to base the service on the execution of its MVNO agreement with Verizon, which allows it to use Verizon's infrastructure on a wholesale basis, and Comcast's more than 10 million Wi-Fi hotspots across the U.S. When asked if the company now views Verizon as a network supplier or partner in business, Roberts held his thoughts close to the vest. "Stay tuned and we'll clarify things," he said. "We're putting together a good relationship we believe and we're excited to get it launched, and we're learn a lot as we go. The way X1 went, we crawled, walked and then run. We knew for sure we had a really special thing before we really hit the pedal and that allowed us to answer the previous question [about X1's future] with a lot of confidence." He added Comcast will be "very transparent" as the wireless launch gets underway.

The NBCUniversal division continued to report solid numbers and milestones. Saturday Night Live had its most watched season in 20 years (Alec Baldwin, anyone?), and the once money-losing Telemundo's ability to beat out Univision in ratings. The division also reported a 13 percent increase in revenue and a strong hold on the key 18-49 rating demographic. While a financial windfall in theaters in 2015 related to franchise flicks made profits last year pale in comparison, the success of *Sing* and *The Secret Life of Pets* in 2016 set the foundation for future, profit-driving franchises in the future, executives said. This year, the releases of *50 Shades Darker*, *Fate of the Furious* and *Despicable Me 3* are seen as promising.

The star of NBC Universal may be its theme parks as record attendance at Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal's California property and a strong Japanese Yen at the Universal Studios Japan contributed to solid profits in this sector of Comcast's business. The success is expected to continue in 2017 as *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* attraction is set to open in April and Universal's tech-forward water park Volcano Bay will open the company's third gate in May, both in Florida. "We expect big things for Orlando in 2017," said Roberts. Steve Burke, the CEO of NBCUniversal said later in the call he sees significant runway and growth in the long-term if investments in the theme park division continue. — **Philadelphia Business Journal**

More rural Tennesseans will have access to reliable broadband services through state tax breaks or grants, "deregulation" and consumer education, Gov. Bill Haslam said Thursday morning in introducing the latest plank of his legislative agenda. "Unfortunately today, too many of our citizens are without broadband access. In fact, 34 percent of our rural residents do not have broadband access at recognized minimum standards," Haslam said Thursday at Cane Ridge High School in Antioch. Haslam spokeswoman Jennifer Donnals said the 34 percent figure represents about 725,000 people.

The announcement of the plan, officially known as the "Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act," comes after more than a year of meeting with state leaders and "stakeholders," Haslam

said. Expanding broadband is not new to Tennessee or other rural states, and has been hotly debated in the past. That includes an [ongoing debate in Chattanooga](#) and elsewhere over whether municipal providers – cities and counties – should be allowed to provide service outside of their borders.

Competition is a key facet of that discussion; it is typically less expensive for any provider to bring services to a heavily populated metropolitan area than to rural communities. That means there is more competition in places like Nashville than in many counties throughout East Tennessee. Competition in Nashville has led to a fight over fiber, the material that makes high-speed Internet possible. Private providers Google, AT&T and Comcast, along with the Nashville Metro Council, are embroiled in a political and legal fight over Nashville's new "One-Touch, Make Ready" policy, which overhauled the process for companies to access utility poles.

The goal of the state act is to get access to everyone, but Haslam didn't give specific details on the precise anticipated increase in access to broadband. However, Tennessee Economic and Community Development Commissioner Randy Boyd said 87 percent of the state has access to broadband today, with some estimating that number will be 93 percent in four years. Haslam's broadband act will provide access to an estimated 97 percent of the state, Boyd said, a percentage that would give Tennessee more access to broadband than any other state in the southeast.

Haslam's investment portion of his plan aims to help ease the cost of expanding in this markets. The plan will provide \$45 million over 3 years in grants and tax credits for service providers. Specifically Haslam is proposing \$30 million in grant money aimed at encouraging deployment to "underserved" areas, and \$15 million in tax credits for providers to purchase "broadband specifics." In this case, deregulation means allowing electrical cooperatives to provide broadband, something they are currently banned from doing. Many of these cooperatives are already operating in these underserved communities, which could speed up deployment, according to the announcement.

"Our electrical cooperatives serve nearly two-and-a-half million Tennesseans and they're uniquely situated to provide broadband service universally throughout their service territories," Haslam said. Municipal electrical systems will also be able to partner with these cooperatives on any broadband projects, Donnals said. However, that does not mean the Haslam administration favors allowing municipalities to offer retail broadband services outside of their boarders. Instead, municipalities could offer broadband at a wholesale level to cooperatives, explained Amanda Martin, a special projects manager for the state Department of Economic and Community Development. At that point, the cooperative could provide retail broadband service to individual customers who may be outside a municipality. "What this does is it enables (infrastructure) expansion without the municipal provider to do the build out and take on additional debt. It basically allows for expansion without the additional risk to the taxpayer," Martin said.

None of the expansions matter if citizens don't know how to use the technology, Haslam said, noting the importance of education. "The plan will provide grant funding opportunities to local libraries to help our residents improve their digital literacy skills and to learn about the benefits of broadband," Haslam said. Sen. Majority Leader Mark Norris said the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, a state entity that in part regulates telecommunications and broadband access, will approve Thursday afternoon [a final report](#) on "Broadband Internet Deployment, Availability, and Adoption in Tennessee."⁵

Haslam and Norris said the governor's legislative package and TACIR's plan will work in conjunction to achieve the goal of greater access. In general, the fact Norris — along with Boyd and Tennessee Department of Education Commissioner Candice McQueen — attended the unveiling of this plan could mean its prospects of passing in the legislature are high. Other legislation to expand broadband, including one filed by likely gubernatorial candidate Sen. Mark Green, indicate the issue is clearly one lawmakers recognize as something that should be addressed.

It remains to be seen how private providers react to the plan, though. A statement Thursday morning from Joelle Phillips, president of AT&T Tennessee, thanked the governor for the plan but gave no indication as to whether the massive telecommunications company will back the proposal. "With billions invested in our Tennessee networks, we are encouraged by the governor's recognition of the work being done by private industry and are also pleased to see the conversation shift toward a more comprehensive approach to encourage continued and accelerated rural broadband deployment, adoption and digital literacy. We look forward to examining the proposed language," Phillips said in an emailed statement. A representative from Google did not immediately respond to a request for comment. A Comcast spokesman declined comment, referring a reporter to the Tennessee Cable Telecommunications Association.

TCTA President Amy Martin said she supports the governor's desire to expand broadband and appreciates the dialogue on the bill from his office in the past months. But it's still too early to say

whether her organization will support the specific proposal. "We hope that we can ultimately support it, but until we see the legislation I can't make a comment on that," Martin said in a phone interview.

David Callis, executive vice president and general manager of the Tennessee Electric Cooperative Association, seemed to share a similar sentiment. In an emailed statement he also thanked Haslam for paying attention to increasing access and specifically to cooperatives. "The Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act acknowledges the unique role electric co-ops can play in expanding access to broadband," Callis said. "We are honored that the governor recognizes the deep roots co-ops have in rural and suburban Tennessee, and we look forward to working with the members of the 110th General Assembly to expand connectivity and opportunity."

Levoy Knowles, executive director of the Tennessee Telecommunications Association, also thanked the governor but took a wait-and-see approach with the legislation in a statement. The governor has yet to officially file his legislation, which is fairly standard at this early point in the legislative session. It's also typical for any such legislation to change, at times substantially, before it has a chance of receiving enough legislative support. Haslam could provide more details about the plan when he delivers his State of the State address Monday. — *Nashville Tennessean*



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