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A York-based group looking to route an ultra-high capacity fiber broadband through Pottstown will hold an informational meeting on the project's potential Wednesday in the community room of Montgomery County Community College's West Campus. The briefing begins at 1:30 p.m.

The **Pennsylvania Gigabit Revolution** is a broadband initiative to maximize every possible synergy for six "off-ramps" from an ultra-high capacity fiber broadband system to be constructed in 2016 running from New York City through the Pottstown area to Ashburn, Virginia. The program is funded in part by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development Broadband Outreach and Aggregation Fund.

Presently, most ultra-high capacity fiber between NYC and DC runs along the Amtrak/I-95 corridor. York-based, United Fiber & Data is building this ultra-high capacity fiber broadband to improve redundancy, capacity, and safety. Like interchanges on interstate highways, the United Fiber & Data fiber creates an opportunity for communities that maximize an "off-ramp" to this digital super-highway.

Representatives of United Fiber & Data and Business Information Group Inc. will be host Wednesday's briefing and the public is encouraged to attend. This meeting was originally scheduled for Jan. 25, but was postponed due to the weather. – ***Pottstown (Montgomery Co.) Mercury***

If you thought the fight over net neutrality ended when the Federal Communications Commission issued its strong new "Open Internet" rules last year, think again.

The new rules are under attack. Internet providers are challenging them in the courts and are trying to evade them with new kinds of business plans. Even if they survive the legal challenge — and I think they will — they could still be undermined by broadband providers like Comcast and AT&T. Either way, the threat to the open nature of the Internet remains worrisome and real.

"The really big move is turning the Internet into the equivalent of a cable system, where it's a managed network," said Susan Crawford, a professor at Harvard Law School and an outspoken critic of the big broadband providers. "If Comcast and these guys get away with this, other carriers around the world will try to do the same thing."

still in the game

Net neutrality is the principle that Internet providers ought to treat all network traffic the same — they shouldn't block or throttle access to certain sites, apps or services nor, alternatively, give preferential treatment to them. The idea dates back to the early days of the Internet, and the FCC has been trying for the last decade to make it legally enforceable. Last year, it looked like the agency had finally done just that. With its Open Internet Order, the FCC gave net neutrality the strong legal foundation it previously lacked.

The broadband industry is challenging the new rules, but there's good reason to believe the courts will uphold them. In crafting the new rules, the FCC basically followed a blueprint provided by the same court that's now evaluating them. Even if the rules pass muster with the courts, the principle of net neutrality faces a potentially bigger and more dangerous problem, a set of business plans known collectively as "zero rating."

Zero rating is the practice by broadband providers of offering customers access to particular apps, sites or services for free or without tapping into customers' limited monthly allocations of bandwidth. Examples include Facebook Zero, which offers consumers in developing countries free access to the social network; AT&T's Sponsored Data service, which the company pitches as a kind of 1-800 service for the Internet; and T-Mobile's new Binge On service, which allows users to stream video from certain providers without that data counting against their monthly caps.

On their face, the zero-rating plans sound consumer-friendly and broadband providers tout them as such. Who doesn't want to get something for free or be able to access the Internet without having to tap into any of your precious data bits? But they actually have the potential to be pretty pernicious. That's because zero-rating programs can also profoundly influence consumer behavior. Think about it: Which site are you more likely to visit — the one that's free or the one that costs you money or taps into your data allotment?

Because of those incentives, zero-rating programs put broadband providers in the position of picking winners and losers on the Internet. They allow providers to tilt the Internet not in favor of companies that make the best apps or services, but toward their own apps and services; toward those who can afford to pay for preferential treatment; or toward those who have the time, money and resources to jump through the hoops needed to participate in them. Almost by definition, such programs put nonprofits, independent artists and startup companies at a disadvantage.

And zero-rating programs also give broadband providers an incentive to further tilt the market in favor of their own services or those of preferred partners. If you have a large enough data bucket or the price of data is relatively low, it likely won't matter much that you can access some sites without tapping into your monthly allotment. But if data is expensive or your usage caps are low, you're much more likely to use those free services.

That dynamic gives providers an incentive to charge more for data or keep their data caps low, not based on their economic costs, but to promote their zero-rated services. And in fact, that's exactly what's happened in European countries that allowed zero rating and didn't have net neutrality rules in place, said Barbara van Schewick, a professor at Stanford Law School.

Despite being asked to do so, the FCC didn't ban zero-rating programs in its net neutrality rules. However, it tacitly acknowledged that they could violate the spirit of net neutrality and vowed to keep an eye on them. Reportedly, the agency is studying the issue. It's time for the FCC to take a bolder stance and ban them outright. Zero-rating plans may sound good, but they're bad for the Internet and consumers in the long run. – ***San Jose Mercury News***

Television news has devolved into a twenty-four seven "fear factory." Chaos in China, vicious political strife in America, heavily indebted banks overseas, a wave of bankruptcies in the energy patch, predictions of a looming bear market, dizzying intra-day swings in the global equity markets...it's enough to send investors into a fetal position.

Amid all of this uncertainty, where can investors get reliable, dispassionate guidance?

Turn to the money masters. This week, as Wall Street gets ready for the latest earnings report from cable giant Liberty Global, consider the timeless methods of Liberty's legendary CEO, John C. Malone, known as "The King of Cable." This company is among a group of tech-intensive stocks poised to "beat the bear" in 2016.

Liberty Global is an international cable company with operations in 14 countries. The company provides television, broadband Internet and telephony services to 25 million customers. The company is scheduled to announce fourth-quarter fiscal 2015 earnings on Tuesday.

Analysts are expecting weak results, but if you read between the lines and consider Malone's history of far-sighted moves, it's clear that the company is an attractive long-term opportunity. John Malone is one of the few individuals who can actually claim to be a mentor to super investor Warren Buffett. With an estimated net worth of $9 billion, Malone is an icon of the cable industry. Over the course of his forty-year career, he pioneered many business and investment practices that seemed outrageous at the time but which are common practice today.

Malone served as chief executive officer of cable and telecommunications giant Tele-Communications Inc. (TCI), from 1973 to 1996. AT&T purchased TCI in 1998 for $54 billion. Through a series of deals, AT&T's cable television assets eventually ended up in the hands of Comcast. Malone is now chairman of Liberty Global, among other companies.

To succeed as an investor, you must anticipate how the market will perform before it's obvious to all. Malone has an uncanny ability to spot trends long before the rest of the herd.As an engineer with a Spock-like ability at analysis, Malone grasped earlier than any other cable executive that the crux to creating value in the fast-growing cable television business was to grow big through acquisitions. By expanding in size, a cable company can maximize both financial leverage and leverage with suppliers, particularly programmers. In a cable television system, the largest total operating expense is fees paid to programmers (HBO, Showtime, MTV, ESPN, etc.). The bigger a cable company, the better it can negotiate lower programming costs per subscriber. In turn, the more subscribers a cable company has, the lower its programming cost, and the higher its cash flow per subscriber.

How successful is Malone's track record? From the time he joined TCI in 1973 until 1998 when the company was sold to AT&T, the compound return to TCI's shareholders was a whopping 30.3%, compared with 20.4% for all other publicly traded cable companies and 14.3% for the S&P 500 over the same period.

Malone is now pursuing the same strategy with Liberty Global, which makes it one of the best "game changing" investments this year. With a market cap of $26.62 billion, Liberty Global boasts 12-month trailing (TTM) operating cash flow of of $5.7 billion, a huge financial war chest that gives it the wherewithal to expand and upgrade its systems.

Liberty Global last issued its quarterly earnings in November, when it reported 12 cents in earnings per share, beating analysts' consensus estimates of five cents a share. Revenue in the quarter came in at $4.6 billion, for a 2.2% year-over-year increase. Subscriber additions rose quarter-over-quarter to 320,000.

However, on average analysts expect Liberty Global to post fourth-quarter EPS of 3 cents, which will probably weigh on the stock. But if you put this ostensibly disappointing performance into context, you'll see that the company represents a rare bargain in a risky broader market. In November 2015, Liberty Global adopted advanced wireless gateway technology from data communications firm ARRIS International. These new capabilities significantly enhance Liberty's high-speed broadband Internet and streaming services, which gives Liberty a more competitive platform to provide innovative media offerings in the future.

At the same time, Liberty Global is rapidly expanding its global footprint, especially in under-served developing markets. Notably, the company recently reached an agreement to acquire for $5.3 billion the London-based cable operator Cable & Wireless Communications, which provides services throughout the Caribbean.

Liberty's TTM price-to-sales (P/S) ratio stands at 1.43, compared with 1.84 for direct competitor Comcast and 2.21 for the cable industry as a whole. Year to date, Liberty's stock is down 22.61%, which presents an enticing value play. A low valuation, combined with advanced technology, international diversification, and John Malone's financial savvy, will make Liberty a winning stock in 2016. – ***The Street***