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Oregon lawmakers may rescind a tax break that was meant to encourage companies to offer high-speed internet, less than three years after **legislators voted unanimously to establish it**. Losing the exemption would cost Comcast up to \$15 million a year in taxes and Frontier Communications about \$2.5 million, according to state estimates. That money will go instead to Oregon cities and counties, which lobbied for the repeal.

The state Legislature acted in 2015 at the behest of Google Fiber, which said it wouldn't offer its high-speed service in Portland unless Oregon exempted that company from an unusual tax assessment. Lawmakers created the tax exemption for any company that offered internet service at 1 gigabit per second - that's 1,000 megabits per second, 40 times the federal broadband standard. Google lost interest in Portland in 2016, though, and **abandoned plans to serve the city**. Meanwhile, Comcast and Frontier moved to capitalize.

They each applied for the tax break, seeking an exemption from Oregon's distinct methodology for levying property taxes. On certain companies, including cable TV and internet providers, the state includes the value of a company's intangible assets - including its brand - when assessing the value of its property. The tax exemption lawmakers created in 2015 was broadly written, with few standards for what a company must spend to qualify for the tax break or and no threshold on how many customers it must serve with its gigabit connections. So when Comcast and Frontier each began offering their own gigabit service, they each sought the tax exemption.

That could have cost local governments and school districts more than \$17 million a year, according to new estimates from the nonpartisan Legislative Revenue Office. And that price tag is what prompted the Legislature to reverse course and consider undoing the 2015 legislation. The original bill wasn't properly vetted, according to Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, who led a legislative working group last fall that considered changes to the tax law. He said the tax break failed to ensure that it encouraged internet companies to make investments in Oregon that they wouldn't have made without the exemption. "We should start over. It's too generous a tax break," Nosse said. "I'm not even sure if it's needed, and I think we should stop offering it."

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"any repeal should after a date certain and not made retroactively applicable to investments made based on the existing law; investments that would not have been made absent the tax credit incentive."

The bill now headed for the House floor would award companies the exemption in 2017 but repeal it in future years. To qualify, the companies would have to show they had at least one customer subscribing to their residential gigabit services. They would get the exemption whether or not the Oregon Department of Revenue certifies that they were eligible under terms of the 2015 bill.

The League of Oregon Cities and others who favor the gigabit repeal support allowing the companies to claim the tax break for one year as a reasonable trade-off, since Comcast and Frontier would have to pay the full tax in future years. In a statement, Comcast criticized lawmakers for contemplating a reversal in the tax law so soon after passing it. "Predictability is sound policy and fosters innovation. It's a challenge for high-tech companies such as ours when the rules change so quickly, as is proposed in HB4027. It discourages investment and competition," the company wrote. Nonetheless, Comcast said it is committed to continuing investing in Oregon and its 2,000 employees in the region.
– *Portland Oregonian*

When Margaret Brady's family built her Dry Fork Road home a few years ago, it "didn't even cross my mind to put a landline" into a newly-constructed home. Now, however, she wonders if that should have been more strongly considered because there's "absolutely no internet access" in her home of six. Six people who each have their own internet needs.

Brady isn't the only Cheatham County, Tennessee resident who has struggled with internet access. On Feb. 8, the Cheatham County Democrats organized a public forum at the Pegram Community Center to consider how and when unserved areas in Tennessee could receive broadband internet expansion. Among the panelists were Brady, Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) Senior Research Associate Dr. Matt Owen, Rep. John Ray Clemmons, Cheatham County Librarian May Lingner and Mathew Binkey of Vanderbilt University's Advanced Computing Center. TACIR, a policy research agency, released a [broadband study](#) last year examining on access and options in the state.

Gigabit connections, once a novelty promoted by Google Fiber, are now widely available.

[Comcast offers those speeds throughout its Oregon service territory](#) and CenturyLink offers gigabit connections in much of its territory in and around Portland. The repeal, [House Bill 4027](#), won unanimous approval Tuesday in the House Committee on Revenue.

Frontier said it doesn't object to the bill, provided the new law doesn't seek to rescind tax breaks the company has already earned. "Our position is that the tax credit can and maybe even should be repealed," said Brant Wolf of the Oregon Telecommunications Association, which is representing Frontier before the Oregon Legislature. "However," Wolf wrote in an email,

That report states that about 89 percent of Tennessee residents live where at least one provider offers service at a capacity of the standard speed defined by the Federal Communications Commission in December 2015. But, Owen pointed out, coverage isn't spread evenly – and rural areas tend to draw the short straw – citing approximately 98 percent of urban Tennessee residents live where providers offer the FCC's standard speeds, compared to that of 66 percent of residents in rural areas. "If it's not already a necessity, (broadband is) well on its way to becoming a necessity for communities in the 21st century," Owen said, noting its importance in various fields such as economic development and education.

The Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act, signed by Haslam last year, allocates \$45 million over three years via grants and tax credits, as well as allowing private, nonprofit electric cooperatives to offer broadband services and providing educational resources. As part of the Tennessee Broadband Initiative, political subdivisions can request to be designated a broadband ready community. [The Town of Ashland City has applied](#) to be a designated Broadband Ready Community.

Mayor Rick Johnson said at the forum it's still unclear whether Ashland City will be selected for the grant, and agreed that lack of internet is a "quality of life" issue. Lingner said the Cheatham County libraries have offered some solutions for those lacking internet, but there's still more that could be done. Each location offers a Wi-Fi hotspot checkout program for library card-holders needing internet.

Still, "we don't have the means to provide enough of those hotspots," she said. "They stay on reserve constantly at both libraries." Binkley maintained that the answer doesn't lie in pointing fingers at the technological advancements, but in looking at the politics. The 15-year Vanderbilt University employee noted that in the past 15 years, the university's internet has gotten 1,000 times faster, yet the internet in his Cheatham County home has only gotten five times faster in the same amount of time, "and I'm one of the lucky ones." "He's right. It's that simple," Clemmons said of politics' role in broadband expansion. "I think the biggest problem is, is that you don't have a lot of your elected officials listening to the folks who don't have access to internet."

Clemmons proposed setting a deadline for universal coverage in Tennessee. Though he voted in favor of the legislation passed last year, he said, there's still more that should be done to expand broadband access. "The free flow of information is vital to maintain," Clemmons said. "So, we need to do whatever we can to create access – universal access – and make sure nobody's going to limit that access and charge you more for that free flow of information." – *Nashville Tennessean*

When Philadelphia Democrats win a seat in the U.S. House, they can usually bank on keeping it for life. Incumbents rarely face primary challengers in this one-party town. One of the few exceptions to that rule is politicians who are under the cloud of criminal investigations.

Think that's an exaggeration? Consider the case of decades-long U.S. Rep. Bob Brady: He never had a serious opponent until the [FBI began eyeing his campaign finances](#) last year. Then four candidates launched bids against him, and he [announced his retirement](#). Until a few days ago, it looked like the city's two congressmen running for reelection — Brendan Boyle and Dwight Evans — would face nada competition per usual. Zero Democrats had declared campaigns in their districts.

But then the Pennsylvania Supreme Court [imposed a new congressional district map](#) for the 2018 elections. Thanks to that defibrillator to the city's fatigued political system, we're now hearing that several boldface names are thinking about challenging Boyle and Evans. Boyle appears to have the most people looking at his seat. There may be a couple reasons for that: For one thing, he isn't allied with some of the ward leaders in the new Second District, where he's running for reelection. The Second District is also home to [only half of Boyle's constituents under the previous congressional district map](#). Compare that to the Third District, where Evans lives. It has 80 percent of the same constituents.

Bill Green, a School Reform Commission member and former city councilman, is rumored to be considering a run against Boyle. On Wednesday, he changed his party registration from independent to Democrat, according a source in the city's voter registration office. Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez appears to be thinking about it, too. A source close to Sánchez said the new Second District "lends itself to a viable female candidate with her profile."

Two other potential Boyle challengers, both of whom share the congressman's political base in Northeast Philly, are being whispered about: State Sen. John Sabatina Jr. and State Rep. Michael Driscoll. Prepare for things to get ugly if Sabatina jumps in: The Sabatinas and Boyles have a [longtime family feud](#). Boyle's brother, a state lawmaker, unsuccessfully challenged Sabatina in

2016. Meanwhile, Michele Lawrence, a former senior vice president at Wells Fargo, officially **leaped into the race** against Boyle on Thursday.

It won't be easy for challengers to take on Boyle, though: He said this week that he had nearly \$1 million in the bank. Evans, who is running in the new Third District, isn't safe from formidable foes, either. A source close to Nina Ahmad, Philadelphia's former deputy mayor for public engagement, said she was mulling a bid against Evans or Boyle. Another possibility, the insider said, is that she'll go for the new Fifth District, a wide-open congressional seat based in Delaware County, but with a chunk of South Philly.

We can't help but notice that Ahmad, who previously ran against Brady, has more campaign funding on hand than Evans: At the end of 2017, she had \$564,000. He reported only \$103,000. When Clout pointed that out to Ahmad, she not-so-subtly replied, "I know." – *Philadelphia Daily News*

