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**Philadelphia**

Pennsylvania lawmakers plan to overhaul the state's 911 Emergency Telephone Act to adapt to changing technology and create a fee structure for system upkeep. State Rep. Steve Barrar, majority chairman of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, is opposed to raising the monthly emergency call surcharge to \$2 per month. "I don't foresee under any circumstances a \$2 fee coming out of this committee," Barrar, R-160, of Upper Chichester, said during a public hearing on the drafted bill, mentioning a more realistic approach would increase the current fee to \$1.50 or \$1.75 per device per month. "I think it's almost impossible that you will see anything more than that."

Pennsylvania's 911 Emergency Telephone Act was created in 1990 to provide a toll-free number, 911, for state residents to gain direct access to first responders in case of an emergency. The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency provided technical oversight, while the state's Department of Community Affairs controlled the program. The emergency communication legislation was established during the time of landline phone systems and dial-up Internet access. Cellphones were not as commonly used during the end of the 20th century as they are today. Lawmakers are now forced to make legislative amendments to include technological advancements.

Over the years, technology advancements were addressed by adding additional provisions to the bill, yet, the \$1 surcharge established for landline calls remained the same. It wasn't until 2003 that a collection was allowed from all residents who can call the emergency line from an owned cellphone. The same fee was then established for broadband phone service users in 2008. The changing technology comes at a cost and several lawmakers deliberating on the language of the drafted bill felt the \$2 fee, or establishing a percent-base fee, would better cover cost associated with managing and maintaining "next-generation services." Others felt the 100 percent tax increase is too high.

The idea is to cover not only costs connected to maintaining emergency call centers, but to create an infrastructure that would support text-message capabilities, video calls, and nonhuman calls from systems like OnStar or iPads. Pennsylvania residents incur that cost from the wireless service providers. PEMA collects those funds sends it to the state treasurer using 2 percent of those fees for departmental expenses, according to PEMA's website. "We think that \$2 fee is a bridge too far. It's a very significant increase on the tax we collect for the commonwealth from our customers," said Frank Buzdykowski, director of State Government Relations for Verizon Communications.

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He said broadband and telecommunication customers are the ones that would be hit with the higher fee from providing companies. Implementing a flat fee of \$1.60 per device per month is more reasonable when calculating the statewide average, he said. Fees across Pennsylvania vary based on county population. Only five counties — Delaware, Montgomery, Allegheny, Bucks and Philadelphia counties — pay \$1 per device per month. Thirty counties pay \$1.25 and 34 pay \$1.50. Delaware County Emergency Communications and Management Center, located in Lima, handles more than 1 million calls annually, according to its website. The county also has a community warning system that notifies residents of an emergency.

Increased cellular use also puts pressure on call centers that are handling a higher volume of cellphone calls from the scene of an accident. Some argued the \$2 fee would level out costs associated with emergency dispatch. Consolidating existing services between counties is another cost-savings option, but it would not eliminate the need to increase the call

fee. "We have a fee that is 25 years old," said Doug Hill, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. He said the fee structure created in 1990 didn't take into consideration the growth in technology, making the \$1 per month increase reasonable.

"While I do not agree that the 911 surcharge should be increased to \$2 monthly or per each prepaid purchase as is written in the currently drafted bill, I do support a lower surcharge fee increase that will adequately address the financial needs of our county 911 centers, thereby enhancing the public safety of our communities," Barrar said. "Of course, this 911 surcharge fee increase must be developed with the taxpayer in mind." Barrar also said he agrees that county 911 centers should receive reimbursement funds out of the state 911 call center funds on a quarterly basis versus the end of each fiscal year. "This will empower our county-elected officials to better plan for the fiscal needs of their 911 centers," he said.

Another public hearing on this legislation is scheduled for March 18 in Harrisburg. The hearing in March will be the sixth held to discuss amending the 911 Emergency Telephone Act. PEMA, Emergency Preparedness Committee members and legislative stakeholders plan to have the amended version on Gov. Tom Wolf's desk before June 30. — *Delaware County Daily Times*

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Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad's broadband expansion bill could undergo major changes as it advances in the Legislature, according to the leader of a House committee who says lawmakers have concerns about the measure's long-term funding. The Republican-led commerce committee made last-minute changes Monday to its agenda and removed a planned discussion of the bill, which would offer financial

incentives for service providers to expand broadband, also known as high-speed Internet, in Iowa.

Rep. Peter Cownie, a Republican from West Des Moines and chair of the commerce committee, said Republican lawmakers are concerned about how a proposed grant program would be funded past its first year. The program, which has a \$5 million appropriation, is partially funded by a bond repayment fund that will not be available the following fiscal year

Cownie said he is considering an amendment that could remove the program and instead focus on expanding a property tax program. The program as currently written in the bill would give service providers a three-year break on paying higher property taxes for expanding broadband infrastructure. Service providers have expressed support for expanding it to at least 10 years. The amendment might also have stronger language on the state's focus to expand a fiber-optic network. Industry experts agree it is the most reliable source of robust broadband. "There are three parts," Cownie said after the committee met Monday. "There's the definitions; there's the grants; and then there's the property tax."

Rep. Jo Oldson, a Des Moines Democrat and ranking member of the committee, said Democrats have not discussed proposed changes to the bill. But Rep. Chris Hall, a Democrat from Sioux City who is also on the committee, said he was concerned whether the grant program is sustainable and whether there are enough details sorted out about how its funds will be distributed. He and other lawmakers expressed similar concerns on a panel that initially discussed the bill. – **Associated Press**

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Months after threatening to veto a proposal letting phone companies off the hook for providing basic landline service, Ohio Gov. John Kasich included similar language in his two-year state budget unveiled earlier this month. The proposal would allow phone companies to withdraw landline service once the Federal Communications Commission sets a national policy allowing them to do so. Kasich spokesman Rob Nichols said in November the measure, inserted into a lame-duck agriculture bill, was premature while the FCC is studying the issue.

The FCC began its review late last year, and industry officials don't expect a decision before 2018. But telecom companies say action should be taken earlier so Ohio is ready to transition to broadband networks. The revised language allows the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to order phone companies to continue landline service until "an alternative reasonable and comparatively priced voice service" is available. "Unlike the language discussed during lame duck, this provision will ensure impacted residents will have access to a reasonable and comparatively priced voice service in areas where no other alternatives exist," Nichols said Monday in an email.

Currently, a phone company designated a "carrier of last resort" must provide basic local phone service, which provides access to 9-1-1, caller ID blocking, long distance service and telecommunications relay service for deaf and hearing impaired Ohioans for a low price. AT&T and the Ohio Telecom Association told lawmakers last year that consumers have been shifting away from landline telephone service for years, and telecom companies should be focusing on expanding high-speed internet and wireless services instead of building and maintaining traditional copper line systems.

About 16 percent of Ohio adults use a landline phone the most, while more than 5 percent only use a landline phone, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Under the budget proposal, carriers of last resort that withdraw basic landline service would have to give 120 days notice to customers and the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. Customers who can't find comparatively priced "voice service," which includes voice-over-internet phone service, could petition the PUCO at least 90 days before service is scheduled to end.

The PUCO would then attempt to find reasonable service, but if not, could force the carrier to continue to provide landline service for one year. The bill also directs the PUCO to plan how to transition from a copper-based landline network to a broadband network. Michael Smalz, senior attorney with Ohio Poverty Law Center, said the budget bill version makes some improvements, such as lengthening the notice time from 90 to 120 days. But, he said, it still has one big problem: The burden is on the customer to find comparable service and, if he or she can't, file a petition with the PUCO. "If they're going to allow the companies to simply send a notice, then should require the companies to inform customers of options," Smalz said.

Smalz said elderly and poor Ohioans, who rely on inexpensive landline service, would likely have trouble searching for comparable service and navigating the bureaucracy to challenge the company's withdrawal. Ohio Telecom Association President Charles Moses said Monday the changes ensure customers won't be without "reasonable and comparatively priced" voice service during the transition. "The Ohio Telecom Association applauds Gov. Kasich for his leadership to ensure that consumers and businesses in Ohio benefit from investment in new technologies connected to the

transition to Internet protocol networks," Moses said in a statement. – *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

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Comcast Corp.'s fourth-quarter profit edged up 0.6% thanks to growth in its broadband and business-services divisions, even as video customer additions slowed sharply and cable networks experienced advertising weakness.

Overall, Comcast reported a fourth-quarter profit of \$1.93 billion, or 74 cents a share, slightly up from \$1.91 billion, or 72 cents a share, a year earlier. Excluding certain gains and costs, adjusted profit per share for the latest quarter grew 16.7% to 77 cents a share. Revenue rose 4.8% to \$17.73 billion. Comcast also said it would increase its dividend 11% to \$1 a share on an annualized basis and boost its stock-repurchase program to \$10 billion. It said it would buy back \$4.25 billion of shares in 2015, regardless of whether its pending \$45 billion acquisition of Time Warner Cable Inc. closes.

The company added 6,000 video customers in the quarter, a sharp slowdown from the 46,000 it added a year ago. Analysts surveyed by Thomson Reuters projected a per-share profit of 78 cents on \$17.68 billion in revenue. The latest results come as Comcast is facing tough scrutiny from regulators in Washington over its pending acquisition of Time Warner Cable.

Cable investors also have been concerned about the potential impact of the Federal Communications Commission's proposal to regulate broadband service like a public utility. Comcast's residential video revenue grew only 1.3% in the quarter, continuing a trend of slower growth as the company hasn't raised rates as sharply as before and it markets skinnier bundles of TV channels to customers. Meanwhile, Comcast's subscriber growth in broadband and voice slowed. Comcast added 375,000 broadband subscribers, compared with 379,000 a year ago. Voice subscriber additions dropped to 123,000, from 227,000 in the prior-year period, driven by more customers opting for two-product bundles rather than the full "triple play."

Comcast boosted its broadband revenue 9.9%, while voice revenue declined 1.4%. Business-services revenue jumped 20.8%. Overall at the company's cable business, which accounts for the bulk of the top line, revenue increased 6.1% to \$11.3 billion. Operating cash flow, a measure of profitability, rose 6.3% to \$4.68 billion. At Comcast's NBCUniversal entertainment arm, operating cash flow rose 6.6% to \$1.43 billion, despite continued softness at its cable networks unit. Cable networks experienced a 5.6% decline in ad revenue to \$857 million due to ratings weakness, a malaise that is continuing to drag down many television networks. Cable networks' operating cash flow declined 1.8% to \$912 million.

The broadcast TV segment, home of the flagship NBC network, reported revenue growth of 4.8%, helped by strong ratings at NBC last year. Operating cash flow at the broadcast television unit grew to \$230 million, from \$140 million in the year-ago quarter. The theme parks division experienced a 37.6% increase in operating cash flow to \$352 million, thanks to the popularity of a new "Harry Potter" attraction at the Universal Orlando theme park. Total revenue at NBCUniversal rose 2.3% to \$6.62 billion. – *Wall Street Journal*

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Republicans are increasing the pressure on the Federal Communications Commission to delay a Thursday vote on high-profile rules governing the treatment of Internet traffic, saying the public needs time to see and review the plan. Two Republicans on the five-member FCC urged the agency to delay the vote, calling on Chairman Tom Wheeler to make his proposal public and subject to a 30-day review period before the proposal is completed. On Capitol Hill, House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R., Utah) urged Mr. Wheeler to appear at a hearing on Capitol Hill before the vote, and to make the proposal public before the FCC decides whether to complete it.

The FCC's proposal has been the subject of a heated partisan battle since Mr. Wheeler made public the outlines of a proposal to ban Internet service providers from blocking, slowing down or speeding up certain websites in exchange for payment. Democrats have generally supported the plan, while Republicans have criticized both the concept and the process through which it was developed.

Among other things, the Republican FCC commissioners have complained that Mr. Wheeler reversed course and changed the original proposal without making it public. That, they say, means the FCC would be voting Thursday on final rules that the public hasn't seen. The other three commissioners are Democrats. "With the future of the entire Internet at stake, it is imperative that the FCC get this right," Commissioners Ajit Pai and Mike O'Reilly said in a statement. "And to do that, we must live up to the highest standards of transparency. Transparency is particularly important here because the plan in front of us right now is so drastically different than the proposal the FCC adopted and put out for public comment in May."

The agency says that it has already spent ample time considering the views of the public, and is simply

following routine procedures in voting to complete the proposal on Thursday. “The FCC has received unprecedented levels of public comment on a variety of options for Open Internet rules over the past year through an open and transparent proceeding, producing a record of more than 4 million comments,” FCC spokeswoman Kim Hart said in a statement. “In accordance with long-standing FCC process followed in both Democratic and Republican administrations, Chairman Wheeler circulated his proposal to his fellow Commissioners for review three weeks before the scheduled vote. The Chairman has seriously considered all input he has received on this important matter, including feedback from his FCC colleagues.”

To implement the rules, Mr. Wheeler has proposed reclassifying broadband from a lightly regulated information service to a more strictly overseen telecommunications service. That is an approach similar to what President Barack Obama called for shortly after the November elections, when he urged the agency to adopt “the strongest possible rules” to protect the principle that all Internet traffic should be treated equally. Known as net neutrality, the principle has been the subject of debate in policy-making and technology circles for years, reaching its most momentous point yet with the looming FCC vote.

Supporters of the approach say that without such rules, broadband companies could charge tolls to websites for their fastest speeds, effectively discriminating against startups and smaller websites that lack the financial wherewithal to make the payments. But critics say the FCC plan would give the agency the authority to regulate prices, allowing future commissioners to do so if they chose, and consequently depressing investment in upgrading networks. Mr. Wheeler has brushed aside those fears, and specifically said the FCC wouldn’t regulate broadband prices. – *Wall Street Journal*



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