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Federal officials Tuesday released a draft plan to expand a \$9.25-a-month phone subsidy for low-income people to include broadband Internet service.

The plan, tentatively announced in mid-2015, is aimed at helping bridge a potentially worrisome divide between higher-income and lower-income households when it comes to Internet access. But critics, including Republican members of Congress and of the Federal Communications Commission, say the program has been subject to serious waste and abuse, and its safeguards should be further strengthened before it is expanded. An FCC vote on the plan is expected at the agency's March 31 meeting. Details were announced on Tuesday by two Democrats on the commission, Chairman Tom Wheeler and Mignon Clyburn.

The plan would broaden the 30-year-old phone subsidy known as Lifeline to include broadband, either as a stand-alone service or bundled with other services. It appears likely to attract support from the FCC's Democrats, who hold a majority, although Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, the third Democrat, was still studying the proposal on Tuesday. FCC aides said changes to the draft plan were possible. "Internet access has become a prerequisite for full participation in our economy and our society, but nearly one in five Americans is still not benefiting from the opportunities made possible by the most powerful and pervasive platform in history," Mr. Wheeler and Ms. Clyburn said in a blog post on the FCC's website. "By modernizing the FCC's Lifeline program, we will do better."

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GOP Commissioner Michael O’Rielly criticized a commission fact sheet about the plan, saying it raised more questions than it answered. He worried in a recent blog post that the expansion of Lifeline to broadband would become an excuse to “spend through the roof” with no accountability. He said on Tuesday that it is unclear whether the plan has sufficient budget controls.

In a blog post, a Comcast Corp. senior executive, David Cohen, applauded the FCC’s effort. But he warned that the FCC must ensure the public funding that supports the program doesn’t “impose an unreasonable burden on consumers.”

The program is funded by a Universal Service Fund tax on consumers’ phone bills. The FCC plan would substantially

boost the program’s annual budget to about \$2.25 billion, from the current level of just over \$1.5 billion. Officials said they don’t expect to spend that much initially, but they hope to use a range of proposed changes to attract more carriers and customers. For example, the plan would establish an independent national clearinghouse to determine customers’ eligibility, FCC officials said. That could reduce the burden on providers while further deterring waste and abuse.

About 12 million households have used the program in recent years. They have been able to qualify if they are eligible for other federal aid such as Medicaid. The new plan would streamline eligibility standards while adding a few new categories, officials said. They believe their changes eventually could add 5 million or more households to that number. But questions remain about how many more people would sign up, particularly given the subsidy’s limited size in comparison to typical bills.

Spending on the Lifeline program has dropped since an overhaul in 2012 that was aimed at reducing the number of households improperly receiving duplicate subsidies. Officials said they hope their plan will promote use of mobile devices with Wi-Fi capability as part of their effort to reduce the “homework gap”—the difficulty many poor children have in completing schoolwork that requires Internet

access, particularly data-intensive uses. The FCC has said fewer than half of households with incomes of less than \$25,000 a year have home Internet access. — *Wall Street Journal*; [more from Philly.com](#)

It's a favorite applause line: Republican presidential contenders rail against President Barack Obama for overregulating and promise that when they take the White House they would roll back federal rules of the past eight years. "We're going to get rid of the regulations that are just destroying us," businessman Donald Trump said at a recent Dallas rally. "You can't breathe—you cannot breathe."

Others are equally emphatic. "Together, we will repeal Obamacare, abolish the IRS, pull back the EPA regulators that are killing small businesses, stop amnesty and secure the borders," Sen. Ted Cruz said on March 1.

But repealing federal regulations is far easier promised than done. Few finalized regulations have ever been successfully undone by a succeeding administration, Republican or Democratic. And the few that did fall were far less politically charged than the Obama administration regulations under fire today, so while they had less fierce opposition, they also had less impassioned support.

Repealing Obama-era rules would require writing—and legally justifying—new regulations, a process that could take nearly two years and might not withstand legal scrutiny, given the body of legal and scientific work that typically goes into writing a rule in the first place, experts say. Other efforts to nullify rules, such as congressional or court action, face limitations of their own. "You can't just repeal regulations with a stroke of a pen like you can an executive order," said Susan Dudley, who was a top official in the White House's Office of Management and Budget during the George W. Bush administration.

A GOP president would also have to call on Congress to pass bills repealing contentious laws passed during Mr. Obama's term that are carried out by his administration, most notably the Affordable Care Act and the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act, which Congress enacted in the wake of the financial crisis. Among the biggest regulatory targets for Republicans are Mr. Obama's environmental regulations, especially one limiting carbon emissions at power plants, as well as rules making it easier to approve unions and the "net neutrality" Internet regulation.

Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) told the Oklahoma Independent Petroleum Association last year he would quickly toss out the carbon rule. "As president, I will immediately stop this massive regulation," he said. The reality is more complicated. Nearly eight years ago, the incoming Obama team similarly pledged to review Bush-era rules, including a slew of "midnight regulations" pushed through as Mr. Bush was preparing to leave office.

But of the more than 4,500 proposed or final regulatory actions cleared by the Bush White House, Mr. Obama repealed just 74 in his first nine months in office, when rules are most often revisited, according to a 2009 presentation by a former official of the White House Office of Management and Budget. Of those, only 34 were final rules.

William Galston, a policy adviser to Bill Clinton when he was president, said GOP candidates often don't distinguish between regulations and executive orders—such as Mr. Obama's move to shield some undocumented immigrants from deportation—that could indeed be reversed immediately. The candidates' statements risk unduly raising voter expectations, said Mr. Galston, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "To some considerable extent, they've made their own bed by overpromising," he said.

That hasn't stopped the candidates, who are reflecting a sentiment among many

GOP voters that Mr. Obama has governed unilaterally rather than by reaching agreements with the Republican-controlled Congress. Mr. Obama's supporters say the president had little choice after Republicans refused to compromise or work with him.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich has called for a one-year freeze on major new regulations and wants congressional approval for any regulation determined to cost the economy more than \$100 million. Mr. Rubio has proposed a cap on federal regulations' cost to the economy. Mr. Trump has decried regulation but hasn't laid out a specific proposal.

Ari Fleischer, a press secretary in the George W. Bush White House, said that despite the complexity of repealing regulations, campaigning on such pledges is an effective strategy for Republicans. "In terms of the messaging, given the anti-Obama mood, it's a smart thing to say," Mr. Fleischer said, "even if full implementation takes some time."

That time is required in part because rules can quickly become entrenched and hard to reverse. A new federal rule aimed at streamlining union-organizing elections, for example, has taken effect and sped up the process, as businesses feared it would. Labor groups and employees have filed hundreds of petitions to hold elections on forming unions since the rule kicked in last year. An Environmental Protection Agency rule cutting carbon emissions from power plants has also been finalized, and electric plants have begun adjusting to it. By the time a new president could begin the process of undoing it, the repeal could make little difference.

That's one reason Mr. Obama's opponents have challenged some regulations in court, winning some notable successes. The Supreme Court last month put a hold on the administration's carbon rule, for example. A new president could simply refuse to defend the Obama regulations facing these lawsuits. But that would only work for regulations facing strong legal challenges, and the judicial landscape has become more muddled on that front, as on many others, with the death of conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

A Republican president could also try to repeal a rule by persuading Congress to eliminate it. But because Republicans are unlikely to have a big-enough Senate majority to overcome procedural hurdles, that approach would be difficult. "There's not going to be a single bullet that's going to undo eight years of regulation," said Sam Batkin, director of regulatory policy at American Action Forum, a conservative think tank. "It's not an easy thing to undo, so I would imagine they would not rely on a single approach to address it." – **Wall Street Journal**



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