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Pennsylvanians may soon be paying a larger monthly fee on their phone bills following state House passage on Monday of a measure designed to help counties fund their 911 emergency communications centers.

The House voted 134-59 to increase to \$1.65 a month a fee that currently ranges from \$1 to \$1.50. The legislation would still have to pass the Senate and get the governor's support. The county commissioners' association has sought a doubling in the fee, to

\$2. Supporters said counties are struggling with operational and technology costs.

"This is public safety, this is lives on the line," said Rep. Dom Costa, D-Allegheny, a former police officer. But critics argued the money was not needed, and that current state revenues should be sufficient to pay the cost. "What is enough for emergency services? What is enough for any government services?" said Rep. Carl Metzgar, R-Somerset. "Our job is to draw the line, and I respectfully request that we draw it far lower."

The vote did not break along party lines - both the Democratic and Republican caucuses were divided. "We're about the 10th highest in the country in terms of all taxes," said Rep. Brad Roae, R-Crawford. "Fees and taxes are really the same thing. If the government says you have to pay it, it's a tax." Rep. Jordan Harris, D-Philadelphia, said his city fields a large number of 911 calls so it should have a greater say in how the revenue is split up. "In one day we get more calls than many counties get in a whole month," Harris said.

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If a new version of the 25-year-old 911 Public Safety Emergency Telephone Act is not enacted by the end of June, the wireless portion of the fee will expire, creating a financial crisis. The 911 surcharge on phone bills brought in \$173 million of the \$192 million in allowable cost for the dispatch centers a decade ago, but by last year that gap had grown to \$188 million in revenue for \$292 million in cost. By one estimate, the bill that passed the House on Monday will generate \$326 million annually. A Senate Republican spokeswoman has said her members were optimistic they will be able to pass something before the end of June- -- **Associated Press**

spending cuts, not tax increases

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review Editorial: Voter ID – Fake 'burden'

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Comcast Corp. Chief Executive Brian Roberts opened the annual cable television convention Tuesday with a demonstration of his company's new Xfinity remote control, which now recognizes voice commands.

From the convention hall stage in Chicago, Roberts asked the Xfinity system to "show me the Comcast-Time Warner Cable merger." Two monstrous screens behind him displayed an explosion and massive fireball consuming a house in Los Angeles, a scene from Universal Pictures' juggernaut hit "Furious 7." "That pretty much sums it up," Roberts deadpanned of his company's failed \$45-billion merger. The crowd roared with approval. "We really have moved on," Roberts said.

So began the newly named INTX: the Internet and Television Expo conference, which previously was known as the National Cable Show. The reason for the name change, National Cable & Telecommunications Assn. Chief Executive Michael Powell said, is to recognize a new vision and the new realities. The pay-TV industry is doing its best to start a new chapter and move away from a stodgy image of fat cables and poor customer service.

Powell was asked why drop the word "cable." "I hate the name," he said. "It has a proud history but it needs to be retired." Powell acknowledged the tremendous investments by the cable TV industry, including \$60 billion in upgrades over just the last year, and the build-out of broadband cable lines has allowed the technology revolution to take hold and the Internet to prosper. "We shouldn't declare its demise prematurely," Powell said of the cable industry, noting that there continue to be nearly 100 million homes in the U.S. with pay-TV subscriptions. "This industry has deployed the most sophisticated technical infrastructure in the world in the fastest possible way."

But the new focus of the convention, organizers said, is to embrace disruption and bring together "friends and frenemies": legacy companies and the new guard that is helping guide the development of the Internet. Two of those "friends and frenemies" -- Roberts and Peter Chernin, the former president of News Corp. -- took the stage after Powell.

Chernin has played a key role in the industry's transition, helping to advise Comcast nearly five years ago during its takeover of NBCUniversal nearly five years ago. He now runs the independent media company Chernin Group, which has Internet and international investments. Chernin was frustrated two years ago in his efforts to lead a team that tried to buy the online video site Hulu, which Chernin helped create when he was at News Corp./Fox. Hulu's three owners -- Walt Disney Co., 21st Century Fox and the Comcast-owned NBCUniversal (which has a passive interest) -- ended up holding onto the venture. "What you are seeing is a tremendous distribution explosion," Chernin told the conference audience. "I'm not convinced that you are going to see the collapse of the [pay-TV programming] bundle. I think that is wildly overstated."

However, Chernin said, the digital disruption will force the pay-TV industry to adapt and do a better job providing consumers with the channels they want. "In some ways, it will force the bundle to justify itself, and that is obviously not the worst thing in the world," he said. Chernin said that in the new media world, big brands will survive.

He ticked off several important brands and noted that a brand must mean something. Services have to provide consumers with substance and can't simply be aggregators, he said, because consumers have become their own individual aggregators. "Brands are driving enormous value," Chernin said. "Technology has made the world come a lot closer. The overall future is incredibly bright. There are a gazillion consumers out there all over the world." Roberts sounded a similar note. "It is such a new world," he said. "It is good to keep our eyes open and .. not just live in the past." – **Los Angeles Times**

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Comcast Corp. will add more than 5,500 customer service jobs as part of a "customer

experience transformation” effort. Comcast said the plan “centers on looking at every decision through a customer lens and making measurable changes and improvements across the company.” Seeking to reduce late arrivals for installation appointments, the company is bulking up its hiring of technicians. If a technician doesn’t arrive on time, Comcast will automatically credit the customer \$20.

Comcast, the largest U.S. cable company, recently walked away from a planned \$45 billion merger with Time Warner Cable Inc. amid stiff regulatory resistance. Comcast fared poorly in J.D. Power’s customer-satisfaction rankings released in September. In April 2014, when Comcast Executive Vice President David L. Cohen appeared before Congress to discuss the planned merger, senators expressed concern about the company’s customer service. Mr. Cohen acknowledged that the company was “having issues” and was “laser focused” on improvement.

On Monday, Comcast reported profit and sales that topped analysts’ estimates as the broadband division posted its strongest revenue growth in more than four years. Comcast’s customer-service effort will also include a tripling of its “social care team” to boost service on Twitter and Facebook. The company is opening customer support facilities in Albuquerque, N.M., Spokane, Wash., and Tucson, Ariz. – ***Wall Street Journal; more in Philadelphia Business Journal***

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DirecTV bucked a trend. But it may not be able to escape it for long. The satellite provider added a net 60,000 U.S. subscribers in the first quarter, which it reported Tuesday. That set it apart from cable providers such as Charter Communications and Comcast, which reported small declines in their video-subscriber bases.

Indeed, the quarter was in many ways a reminder that broadband is both a growth engine and margin stabilizer for pay-TV providers. Trouble is, DirecTV doesn’t offer broadband. If, or rather when, video-subscriber numbers begin to decline in a more meaningful way across the industry, DirecTV’s lack of a broadband cushion means it—and its future owner AT&T—will take the hardest hit. Satellite rival Dish Network faces the same reality, but much of its value is now stems from its investment in wireless airwaves.

Granted, DirecTV’s average revenue per user rose a solid 5.5% in the quarter. But that wasn’t enough to overcome the steep rise in programming costs: its U.S. operating margin fell to 19.3% in the quarter from 20.4% last year. For pay-TV margins, the writing may be on the wall. – ***Wall Street Journal***



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