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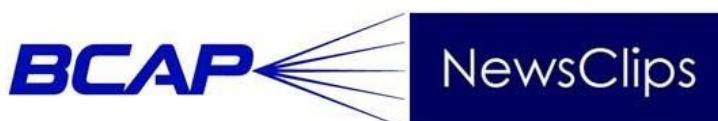
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B+C

Florida officials and Comcast Corp. CEO Brian Roberts announced plans on Thursday for a big expansion of the Universal theme park

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operations in the Orlando, Fla., area with a new park expected to employ about 14,000 workers. The current park employs about 25,000 workers. Comcast did not disclose a timeline for the project or say how much would be invested. The company said that its Universal unit has agreed to finance \$160 million in road extensions to open an area for Epic Universe. The Philadelphia-based company has faced deep cable-TV subscriber losses as people look to cut their cord and cable bills, opting for streaming services instead.

Looking for growth, Comcast has focused on high-speed internet services, theme parks, and global markets. "Our new park represents the [\*\*single-largest investment Comcast NBCUniversal\*\*](#) has made in its theme park business and in Florida overall," Roberts said in a statement. "It reflects the tremendous excitement we have for the future of our theme park business and for our entire company's future in Florida." Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis was among those who participated in the announcement. Epic Universe will include hotels, shops, and restaurants, in addition to entertainment attractions. The new park will be located within a 750-acre site. The highly profitable theme park business has boomed for Comcast. In the Philadelphia company's recently reported [\*\*second-quarter earnings\*\*](#), theme parks comprised about 18 percent of revenues in its NBCUniversal division but 24 percent of earnings.

Steve Burke, the head of NBCUniversal, said on a July 25 conference call that "we continue to love the [theme park] business and think it fits very well with our animated movie business and other things we do." Universal competes with the Walt Disney Co. and SeaWorld in Florida. In addition to the United States, Comcast is investing into a theme park in China. — *Philadelphia Inquirer*

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Notice more TV ads lately? You're not imagining it.

The amount of commercial time on cable TV keeps increasing as networks try to make up for shrinking audiences by stuffing more ads into every hour of television. That's despite years of promises to cut back on ads. Last quarter, commercial time rose 1%, according to Michael Nathanson, an analyst at MoffettNathanson LLC. After declining in 2017, the volume of ads increased every quarter last year and expanded again in the first two quarters of 2019, he said.

As TV viewership declines and more consumers jump to streaming services like Netflix, media companies have only a couple of options to generate the advertising revenue that Wall Street expects: They can raise prices, run more commercials or do a little of both. "Look at the decline in ratings," Nathanson said. "Everyone's got pressure to make their quarterly numbers. Long-term, it's a very bad decision, but you don't want to miss your numbers and have your stock go down."

Media companies are adding more commercials because sponsors are more sensitive to price increases than to clutter, said Brian Wieser, global president of business intelligence at the advertising giant GroupM. And if a TV network were to cut the time allotted for commercials, it would need to boost advertising rates to make up the difference -- a tough sell if rival networks aren't doing the same, Wieser said. The result is "an economic standoff" between the networks and advertisers, according to Howard Shimmel, the former chief research

officer at Turner, which is now part of AT&T Inc. And the losers are viewers. "Networks can't afford to cut their commercial loads dramatically without it affecting ad revenue," said Shimmel, who now runs his own consulting firm. "And ad agencies aren't willing to accept dramatically higher prices for more commercial time."

The big issue isn't the total amount of commercial time -- but the long breaks that viewers must endure, Shimmel said. "If you have to wait six minutes for your content to come back in a world where people have remotes and can quickly switch to Netflix or Hulu, that exacerbates the issue," he said. Too many commercials probably isn't the main reason people cancel their cable-TV service, he said. "But it's definitely in the top five." Media companies say they get it and have pledged in the past to scale back commercials to avoid alienating younger viewers accustomed to watching TV ad-free on Netflix. By airing fewer ads, networks say, the remaining ones will become more memorable, and thus more valuable, allowing them to charge more. In 2016, for example, Turner cut the commercial time on TruTV and three new shows on TNT.

But these moves haven't extended across the company. Turner's commercial load rose 2.4% last quarter to more than 12 minutes per hour, according to Nathanson. A spokesman for the broadcaster said the increase reflected higher ad loads at the kids channel Boomerang, while TruTV cut its ad minutes by 8% and other networks were little changed. AT&T, which bought Turner parent Time Warner Inc. last year, has said the \$85 billion deal will ultimately lead to fewer commercials. The company expects to harvest valuable viewer data that leads to higher ad rates.

In 2017, Viacom Inc. Chief Executive Officer Bob Bakish said during an earnings call that his company's commercial minutes "were unhealthily high" and that he planned to reduce them. Viacom currently has the most commercial time of the major cable network owners, with over 14 minutes every hour, Nathanson said. A spokesman declined to comment. In February 2018, Linda Yaccarino, chairman of advertising and client partnerships at Comcast Corp.'s NBCUniversal, pledged to reduce prime-time commercial minutes by 10% across its networks, which include USA, MSNBC and Bravo.

The company has followed through on that promise and plans to cut more ads during prime time next year, spokesman Joe Benaroch said. "Ad reduction is something NBCU takes extremely seriously," Benaroch said, adding that "there's still more to be done." Sometimes, programming changes can drive shifts in advertising. A+E Networks raised the ad load at its newer Viceland channel by almost 19% after a few years of reduced commercial time. The increase lifted A+E's overall load by 3.2% in the second quarter. Long-term, the creeping increase in ad loads should be a worry. Nathanson's firm surveyed consumers and found that "the No. 1 reason people like Netflix is because it's commercial-free." — **Bloomberg**

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Verizon Communications Inc. added more wireless customers in the second quarter than some analysts expected as the carrier stepped up its promotions and pushed to bring faster 5G wireless service to more cities. The carrier said it added 245,000 net postpaid phone connections during the period compared with the 199,000 such connections it added during the same period last year. JPMorgan Chase & Co. analysts said earlier this week that they expected Verizon

to top their expectation that it would add 175,000 postpaid phone connections during the second quarter after the carrier made a marketing push.

Verizon's earnings come nearly a week after rival T-Mobile US Inc. received [approval from federal antitrust officials to merge with Sprint](#). The union of T-Mobile and Sprint, years in the making, would create a wireless company closer to the size of Verizon and AT&T Inc. The merger still faces further challenges [from a state lawsuit seeking to block it](#). T-Mobile said last week it added 710,000 net postpaid phone customers in the second quarter, while [AT&T's wireless business](#) added 72,000 during the period. Postpaid customers are considered lucrative for carriers because they pay their bill monthly under longer-term contracts.

Verizon has put upgrading its network to 5G at the heart of its corporate strategy and is working to identify the best ways to generate fresh revenue from businesses and consumers alike. Matt Ellis, Verizon's finance chief, said his company has the right strategy regardless of whether T-Mobile and Sprint merge, adding that if the deal goes through the companies will spend two to three years integrating their networks. "That's a big lift as they discussed last week," he said. Earlier this week Verizon turned on the faster service in parts of Washington, Indianapolis, Atlanta and Detroit. To date, its 5G signal in cities like Chicago [has been ultrafast but spotty in part](#) because it uses high-frequency airwaves that don't travel long distances. Executives defended the carrier's spectrum portfolio and said they have the assets they need to expand coverage. Hans Vestberg, Verizon's chief executive, told analysts the company was quickly expanding its coverage in some of the first 5G cities and touted the ultra-fast speeds available.

Verizon executives have said it would take years for the network upgrades to bring in more revenue. The carrier has said it would eventually charge \$10 a month for the service, but is currently waiving that charge for new 5G customers. Its 4G service, meanwhile, faces competition for subscribers in the saturated U.S. market. Verizon is trying to draw new customers and upgrade existing customers to pricier tiers of its unlimited data plans. Verizon had 118.12 million wireless connections, including tablets, smartwatches and other devices, at the end of June, compared with 117.9 million at the end of March.

Mr. Vestberg has restructured the company by the type of customer served, rather than the product sold. The move could help de-emphasize legacy products like Fios video, which has lost customers in recent years. That service lost another 52,000 customers in the second quarter. Overall, net income attributable to Verizon was \$3.9 billion, down from \$4.1 billion a year earlier. Quarterly revenue declined slightly to \$32.1 billion from \$32.2 billion a year ago. Revenue within Verizon's media unit, which includes the Yahoo and AOL properties it acquired, was \$1.8 billion, down 2.9% from a year ago. The company said declines in desktop advertising revenue continue to be a challenge. — *Wall Street Journal*

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Raymond Sackett, 97, accidentally overpaid his AT&T bill online June 13. His bill was \$65.22, but he accidentally typed a comma behind the 6 and [paid the company \\$6,522](#). Since then, he and his family have been working to get a refund. "My husband is not able to get out to

check the mail so this is what I do every day," said Raymond's wife, Martha Sackett. She said she is constantly disappointed when she sees the check has yet to come. "No, not yet," she said Friday as she checked the mailbox. "You would think that if a payment can be received electronically it can be reversed electronically," the couple's son, Mark Sackett said.

He has been helping them contact the company for a refund. "The stress and strain of the calls to AT&T, the empty promises," Mark said. AT&T told the Sacketts a check was in the mail June 21, but it never came. The company sent WXIN a statement: "Our vendor sent Mr. Sackett a reimbursement payment at the end of June, but it appears he did not receive it. We re-sent the payment on Monday and anticipate he should receive it in 7-10 days. We plan to follow up with him to confirm he has received it."

The family said they have heard that before but hopes this time, it's true. "When you get to be a World War II veteran, you need every cent you got," Raymond said. — **Tribune Media Wire**

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Former U.S. Rep. Lou Barletta, a top Pennsylvania surrogate for President Donald Trump's 2020 reelection bid, is trying to combine the thing he is best known for — fierce opposition to undocumented immigration — with something his political brand is not known for — fund-raising.

Barletta, a Hazleton Republican who did not seek a fifth term last year while unsuccessfully challenging Sen. Bob Casey, is now out of public life for the first time in two decades. But he plans to keep pushing tough immigration policies through his new Leaders Only Unite political action committee, known as LOU PAC. The PAC, seeded with leftover funds from Barletta's Senate run, will also support private construction of a new border wall, which Trump promised in 2016 would be paid for by Mexico. As president, Trump has repeatedly stumbled while seeking border-wall construction money from Congress, though the U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled he could dip into other funds to get started.

Barletta last week promised to take the first \$2,500 donated and make a matching contribution to a private campaign to build a border wall on private land. LOU PAC, which had \$141,842 in the bank as of July 1, gave \$5,000 in donations to six campaigns this year. The PAC also paid Barletta's wife \$2,200 per month from January to June for rent in their Hazleton home and an office building they own. Barletta made his border-wall vow at the "Symposium at the Wall," a gathering of conservatives in New Mexico that drew Donald Trump Jr. and former presidential adviser Steve Bannon. That event was sponsored by We Build the Wall, a GoFundMe project that has raised money for the wall and stoked controversy about its financial practices and local land permitting issues. "The mission is going to be securing the borders and standing up for the rule of law," Barletta said of LOU PAC. "I had a lot of donors nationwide who have supported me over the years for my positions on border security, and I want to make a difference."

Republicans, however, have long scoffed (mostly privately, but not always) at Barletta's fund-raising abilities. His 2002 House campaign still had debts until relatively recently. And as a sitting congressman

with the president's support, he raised \$7.4 million for his challenge to Casey. By contrast, Democrat Katie McGinty brought in nearly \$17 million for her 2016 run against Republican Sen. Pat Toomey, and she had never held elected office. Barletta said he's not looking to run for office again — just hoping to help the cause. — **Chris Brennan's "Clout" column in *Philadelphia Daily News***



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