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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

## Fiber Connect: Dissecting Fiber, Mobile's Chances and Video's Longevity

You know you're at the Fiber Connect conference when one of the keynote speakers declares that digital equity will evolve to the point that "those who are stuck with cable are going to be the have nots."

But off the mainstage of the annual **Fiber Broadband Association** gathering, there seemed to be a bit more respect for incumbent cable operators. "DOCSIS 4.0 is about pushing fiber closer and closer to the house. [They've] probably got some really smart people who say, 'look, we're within 300 feet of every house right now with a fiber point. We're going to flip that node to a fiber node and drop fiber. But that's way down the line,' with 10G in the meantime, **Blue Stream Fiber** CEO *Joe Canavan* said during a breakout session Monday titled, "Fiber First Movers."

In the meantime, incumbent cable operators are building out fiber to the home in new areas and some of them are actually attending Fiber Connect this week. "Fiber for us is obviously a brand tool. It's something that we think resonates with customers, but in addition to that, in the grant world, there is scoring criteria and you are weighted based on the type of technology that you're providing. There's a strong preference for fiber," **Cox Communications** Director of Market Expansion *Julie Moran* said during that conference panel. "For us in our expansion efforts, particularly related to government funding, it's important that all of our builds are fiber going forward."

It can work the other way too. **Fort Collins Connexion** is all fiber, but Broadband Executive Director *Chad Crager* acknowledged during the same discussion that there are times FTTH may not be the best path. "We have that tool in our tool belt in case we get into brownfield in the U.S. Keep in mind, especially in historical buildings, they don't want anything on the outside of the building. It's extremely expensive. I'm not ripping up the drywall everywhere to run fiber," he said. "It's limited, but we have that tool because we recognize that the technology and upgrades in the cable industry are going to help us as well."

The takeaway from those in the field seemed to be that the first 20% of customers will come to a new fiber offering just based on their excitement over the technology alone. After that, it's going to take marketing, exceptional customer service and competitive prices. "If somebody has a problem with the cable company and they're ready to switch but you can't get there within 72 hours with brand new fiber, forget it," said Canavan.

There were mixed opinions on what adding mobile brings to a provider. Cox is less than a year into offering mobile service throughout its footprint. "Any product that you can add to a bundle increases its stickiness to customers. We're finding that is the case for us. And frankly, at this point, we would be left in the dust if we didn't have mobile as one of our services now," said Moran.

Fort Collins Connexion is definitely considering mobile, citing **NCTC's** MVNO agreement with **Reach** and **AT&T**. "Candidly, though, it's a distraction. I think sometimes we need to figure



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out what our true north is and stay on that. At the same time, we need to be aware that our competitors are using it and locking people in. That's the beauty—in your typical two- or three-year agreement that you lock in [customers] with most new phones when they buy them,” Crager said. “We're aware of it, but the reality is, it's going to take two years for us to kind of get it going and get an ROI and everything else, and by then, does it still make sense?”

Interestingly, all four providers on the panel offer video, even if it is reluctantly. “I hate [video]. It's 10% of our market and most of the phone calls that come in for troubleshooting are around a set-top box or something like that,” Crager said. “But that's 10% of customers and that's revenue that I would have lost and so if we don't offer it, someone else will.” That's where some fiber providers have cable envy. **LUS Fiber** Director *Ryan Meche* said the Lafayette, Louisiana-community owned telecommunications system offers IPTV, but it's hard to compete with the great video product that Cox offers.

“I think the challenge we have is that the value proposition of video is just wrong for our industry and it's not really great for customers anymore,” said Canavan, giving the advantage to the big incumbent cable operators on video. “Cox, Comcast and Charter—if your company doesn't start with a C, you're going to be outsourcing video in five years.”

## FIBER CONNECT NOTEBOOK

It's not enough just to have fast speeds these days. It's about the customer experience, even if the consumer doesn't always understand what's at play. “I think the conversation on speed probably isn't as important as it was in the past. Because everyone's talking about 5 gig, 10 gig. So many customers have 1 gig. I think it's really about the overall experience provided to the customer and how we use that bandwidth in the home,” *Jeff Manning*, **Shentel** VP, Product and Network Strategy, said during a Fiber Connect session Monday. Delivering the best customer experience can be difficult, especially given that consumers don't always understand the technology they have. Take connected devices. “I think the average is just over 20 devices in the home. But many times we ask people how many connected devices they have and they think it's five,” Manning said. Another difficult concept is latency. Consumers don't have any idea what you're talking about, said **Plume** CMO *Valerie Buckingham*. “The reason that speed is so meaningful [to consumers] is that people know how to count... The reason it's so compelling to talk about speed, aside from it can be different pricing plans, is that it's easy to understand. So, that should be our founding principle: what is easy to understand for consumers.” – The Fiber Broadband Association and **Car-**

**tesian** introduced a BEAD Threshold Financial Model during Fiber Connect Monday to help states estimate their Extremely High Cost Per Location Thresholds for fiber deployments using BEAD funding. The tool utilizes geospatial analysis to build financial models with the goal being to set a threshold that will maximize fiber deployments and encourage service to all eligible locations. The tool will be discussed during a [webinar](#) on August 30 at 12pm ET.

## MO MONEY FOR RECONNECT

The **USDA** announced \$667 million in grants and loans to connect rural areas in 22 states and the Marshall Islands to broadband through a fourth funding round for the Re-Connect Program. Funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the program is designed to fund internet projects in the most remote and unserved communities. “All of these grant [recipients today] are making a commitment to create the potential for their facilities and their operations to have upload speeds/download speeds of 100 over 100, which is a significant increase that will allow for all of the capacity of high-speed broadband to be fully utilized by people regardless of how remote or rural their community may be,” Secretary of Agriculture *Tom Vilsack* said in a call with reporters. USDA still has \$260 million left under the Infrastructure Law, with Vilsack saying that it will be invested in the coming months. The latest Reconnect funding includes a \$24.9 million grant to **Star Telephone Membership Corporation** to benefit 2,674 people, 84 businesses, 117 farms and four educational facilities in the N.C. counties of Bladen, Columbus and Sampson. **The Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma** is receiving \$24.9 million to deploy a fiber-to-the-premises network to reach 4,052 people, 180 businesses, 183 farms and nine educational facilities in Pawnee and Payne counties in Oklahoma.

## WESTERN U.S. SLAMMED BY NATURAL DISASTERS

Social media was full of videos of people playing in floodwaters and storm parties as Tropical Storm Hilary struck southern California. That content stood in stark contrast to the warnings around flooding potential from the storm, the first to strike southern California in 84 years. Hilary was downgraded to a post-tropical storm Monday by the **National Hurricane Center** after delivering record-breaking rainfall. The **FCC** activated its disaster information reporting system in the state Sunday as the storm struck, and the agency reported 58,555 cable and wireline subscribers that were out of service in the disaster area as of 12pm ET Monday. Everything escalated Sunday when a magnitude 5.1 earthquake



struck near Ojai, California, at 2:41pm PT with more than a dozen aftershocks being recorded. Meanwhile, recovery efforts continue in Maui to restore service to customers impacted by wildfires. **Hawaiian Telcom** announced Saturday it has restored service to more than 11,000 customers in N pili, K 'anapali, Kapalua and Makawao. Phone service has also been restored in Kula with crews hard at work to bring back broadband in the area. More than 40 Hawaiian Telcom employees from neighbor islands are currently assisting with the Maui restoration efforts. President *Joe Biden* and First Lady *Jill Biden* are also flying to Hawaii in the aftermath of the worst of the fires. "We'll meet with first responders, spend time with families and community members, and witness what will be required for the community to recover," Biden tweeted Monday. "Throughout our efforts, we are focused on respecting sacred lands, cultures, and traditions."

## ANOTHER SUNDAY TICKET DEAL

**YouTube** and **YouTube TV** have been dishing out enhancements and deals ahead of their first season being the home of **NFL Sunday Ticket**, and the newest deal comes with **FanDuel**. Between now and Sept. 18, new and existing FanDuel customers who place a \$5 bet will get \$100 off Sunday Ticket. New customers will get \$200 in bonus bets on top of the Sunday Ticket discount.

## AMAZON LAUNCHES FREE CHANNELS OFFERING

**Amazon** rolled out a **Fire TV Channels** app that comes packed with free content from over 400 providers, including **MLB**, **ABC News**, **IGN**, **IMDb** and **GoTraveler**. It's available on Fire TV devices in the U.S. and doesn't require any additional downloads or sign-ups. Viewers can find it under the "Fire TV Channels" label or by accessing the "Free" icon in the Fire TV navigation bar.

## CARRIAGE

Streaming platform **ViewLift** inked a multi-year deal with the defending Stanley Cup Champion Las Vegas Golden Knights to stream all of the team's local game broadcasts. It'll begin this season starting September 24 and be available on **Roku**, **Fire TV**, **Apple TV** and **VIZIO**, as well as iOS and Android devices. It follows the Knights' multi-year agreement with **Scripps** revealed in May to air local games on OTA network KMCC-TV. – **VIDGO** added **Family Movie Classics** to its lineup. FMC is now available in 25 million homes with distribution deals including **DirectTV**, **DirectTV Stream**, **Frndly**, **Philo**, **Comcast**, **Freecast** and **DISH**. – **Fox Weather** signed two new distribution deals with **Cox** and **Samsung TV Plus**. The channel will become available to Samsung TV Plus users Wednesday and will also roll out on Samsung Galaxy devices, smart monitors and the web. Cox Contour customers will have access to Fox Weather via its expanded basic package in markets including Las Vegas, Cleveland and Phoenix, which will add 1.7 million subscribers to Fox Weather's distribution base.

## FIBER FRENZY

Nebraska-based **Great Plains Communications** is expanding to 16 communities within the Cornhusker State. Construction is set to begin in all communities by late fall, and once complete will give residents up to 2 Gig symmetrical service, iTV streaming video, security, voice and Whole Home WiFi. Businesses will have access to up to 100 Gig internet speeds, managed ethernet and GPC cloud connect.

## PROGRAMMING

**ESPN** is handing *Scott Van Pelt* hosting duties for "Monday Night Countdown" after the anchor signed a multi-year deal to stay with the network. He joins former Super Bowl champion *Ryan Clark* and former Dallas Cowboys player *Marcus Spears* as newcomers to the show. Van Pelt—who's been with ESPN since 2001—will continue to host the late-night "SportsCenter with Scott Van Pelt" on most weeknights as well as the network's coverage of the Masters and PGA Championship. – **Tennis Channel** is set to return to the upcoming U.S. Open with its daily lead-in show "Tennis Channel Live at the U.S. Open." The two-hour program will begin next Monday at 9am featuring news, highlights and special reports from the competition. It'll switch to a one-hour format with a 7pm start time for Sept. 9-10. During the tournament, **Tennis Channel Plus** will air classic matches from previous U.S. Opens and this season.

## PEOPLE

Seven-year **Charter** vet and Sr. EVP *David Ellen* will shift to an advisory role to President/CEO *Chris Winfrey* effective Dec. 1. Ellen has spent more than two decades in the industry, having served as a special counsel at the **FCC**, EVP/General Counsel for **Cablevision** and in executive roles as Deputy General Counsel at the multi-brand media and internet company **IAC**. At Charter, Ellen was key in the restructuring of the company's corporate and business functions following the **Time Warner Cable** and **Bright House** acquisitions. Ellen also serves on the **National Urban League** board on behalf of Charter. – *P. Robert Bartolo* was elected to **Cable One's** board on Friday. He currently sits as chair of Crown Castle's board and was previously VP of T. Rowe Price Group.

## OBITUARY

*Helen Dolan* passed away Saturday at the age of 96 from natural causes, a Dolan spokesperson announced. She is survived by her husband of 73 years, **Cablevision** and **HBO** Founder *Chuck Dolan*, as well as six children, 22 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. She is known for her philanthropic work, founding The Lustgarten Foundation together with Chuck to support pancreatic cancer research. The pair also created the Dolan Family Foundation and the Dolan Children's Foundation, supporting education, youth and social services.