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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Money Talks: NTCA Focused on Infrastructure Bill at Fall Conference

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association heralded back in the era of live events Monday with the general session kick-off of its Fall Conference and Expo. The hybrid meeting, which drew 1,500 in-person attendees and another few hundred virtual registrations, is coming at a pivotal time for broadband providers with demand higher than ever before thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic and billions potentially coming in federal support.

“As we gather here today, I would suggest that we are at a moment in the history of this association that rivals our early years in its importance,” NTCA chairman *Fred Johnson* said in his opening remarks. “The explosion of broadband internet access and the pandemic-driven acceleration of its importance to all Americans has fundamentally reshaped the nature of our existence forever. Only those who adapt will survive what is truly a paradigm shift.”

The overarching theme of comments from both Johnson and NTCA CEO *Shirley Bloomfield* was a continued focus on removing barriers to broadband deployment. The long-term vision of the NTCA is guided by the board’s overarching belief that by 2030, all rural Americans should have access to robust, reliable and sustainable fixed and mobile voice and broadband services at affordable rates, and the infrastructure bill currently making its way through Congress now has the potential to put a sizable dent in the digital divide.

But workforce shortages and continued stress on supply

chains could lead to delays in broadband deployment that ultimately keep that money from making a meaningful difference in the near future. Broadband providers have been voicing concerns about the impact on the talent pool since the introduction of the infrastructure bill.

“Pouring all that money in, expecting the timeframes that things are going to get done means, in a lot of cases, you’ll be seeing people trying to hire installers,” **Liberty Broadband** president/CEO *Greg Maffei* said during the company’s earnings call in August when asked about what GCI and Charter could experience if the infrastructure bill passes.

For those reasons, Johnson encouraged NTCA members to take full advantage of the association’s affiliation with national supplier **Communications Supply Service Association** to avoid any potential slowdowns tied to materials.

“I completely understand and appreciate the value that many of you place in individual relationships with distributors, but what if your supplier can’t take care of you even in view of that relationship because they don’t have access to materials and supplies?” he said. “It may be that collective cooperation at the associational level is not only our best solution, but also the only viable one to address this critical and emerging issue for quite some time to come.”

Bloomfield highlighted the association’s ongoing work to ensure lawmakers are crafting support programs that can make meaningful impacts in rural America while avoiding potential waste. When speaking on the **FCC’s** deployment of the Rural

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Digital Opportunity Fund, Bloomfield said the association's work on the budget control mechanism saved NTCA members more than \$111 million. She is also continuing to speak with decisionmakers at the **USDA** on reforms for ReConnect, a loan and grant program that provides funds for construction and the acquisition of facilities or equipment needed to deploy broadband in rural areas.

"I know a number of you have been running into obstacles. What can we do to make that program that is such an effective program actually work? How can we take those barriers down so you can put plant in the ground?" Bloomfield said. The program continues through Wednesday with panels covering HR, strengthening community connections and the policy outlook for the rest of the decade.

CELEBRATING OUR 2021 TOP OPS

Congratulations to **Charter** and **TDS** for winning the MSO of the Year and Independent Operator of the Year honors, respectively, in this year's Top Ops magazine. This edition of **Cablefax: The Magazine** celebrates all that the industry's top players have done to support employees, expand service to customers in need and introduce products and offerings built for the future. Charter focused wholly on developing new offers that would allow customers to get and stay connected. The company added more than 450,000 new customers through a 60-day broadband offer for families with students and teachers and forgave more than \$85 million in overdue balances. As for its employees, Charter committed not to lay off or furlough employees through the early months of the pandemic and is raising its minimum starting wage to \$20/

hour by 2022. TDS hasn't let the pandemic stop it from pushing the boundary. It's planning a huge fiber push in 2022 and is continuing to innovate its video services with products like TDS tv+. Speed is a top priority, and all new service areas will be offered 2Gbps symmetrical speeds. Other highlights of this year's magazine include MSO Digital Equity Award winner **Comcast** and Independent Digital Equity Award honoree **Hotwire Communications**. Comcast celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Internet Essentials program for low-income individuals and kicked off its Lift Zones initiative, installing WiFi in community centers across America. Hotwire established its Empowering Communities Foundation in April 2020 as a charitable arm to help close the digital divide. It all started with free internet installation, laptops and a digital literacy program in Philadelphia, North Carolina and South Florida. The Top Ops issue also features Lifetime Achievement awards for **Cox's Pat Esser**, Comcast's **Kathy Zachem** and **Eagle Communications' Gary Shorman**; 10G Pioneer Awards and much more. Read it online at CablefaxTopOps.com.

NETFLIX TAKES EMMYS

Netflix came out on top at the 73rd Emmy Awards telecast Sunday night. The streamer took home 10 awards, followed closely by **HBO** and **HBO Max** (nine). **Apple TV+** grabbed four Emmys with "Ted Lasso" receiving lots of love from voters. The sports-centric comedy even snagged the honor for Outstanding Comedy Series. **Disney**, **NBC**, **VH1** and **Showtime** each brought in one award. Netflix owes most of its wins to "The Crown," but we can't forget the two awards "The Queen's Gambit" (Outstanding Limited or Anthology Series, Outstanding

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Directing for a Limited or Anthology Series or Movie) brought in or *Ewan McGregor's* win for "Halston" (Outstanding Lead Actor in a Limited or Anthology Series or Movie). HBO Max's first Emmys ever are all thanks to "Hacks" (Outstanding Writing, Directing for a Comedy Series) while the linear net's "Mare of Easttown," "I May Destroy You" and "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" were boons for HBO.

STARLINK HITTING THE BIG TIME NEXT MONTH

Starlink, the satellite-powered broadband service from **SpaceX**, is going fully live next month. In his usual fashion, SpaceX founder *Elon Musk* announced the news on **Twitter** in a response to a question from another user. The service has been serving customers via a public beta program since last October. For the past year, customers have paid a one-time \$499 fee for the Starlink terminal and router as well as \$99/month service fee. No word yet on whether that will change when Starlink exits its beta phase.

ROKU GOES 4K

Roku's product lineup is getting a facelift. It introduced two new 4K devices Monday: the Roku Streaming Stick 4K (\$49.99) and the Roku Streaming Stick 4K+ (\$69.99). The former promises faster boot times, smooth streaming in 4K and a redesigned WiFi receiver that's nearly double as fast as its previous iterations. It also comes with the Roku Voice Remote. The Roku Streaming Stick 4K+ pairs the Roku Streaming Stick 4K with Roku's Voice Remote Pro, which offers a rechargeable battery and a voice-activated lost remote finder. The company's software is also getting a refresh. Roku OS 10.5 featuring improved Roku Voice capabilities, new features for the mobile app and expanded surround sound. Both devices will be available to U.S. customers on store shelves and the web in mid-October. The company is also offering new Roku streaming device owners from Oct 1 to Jan 14 free **HBO Max** for 30 days.

HEARST TV GETS "VERY LOCAL"

Hearst Television is the latest to join the FAST channel game. Monday marked the release of **Very Local**, a streaming app featuring ad-supported FAST channels local news and content from other communities across the nation. Very Local features locally-focused FAST channels from across Hearst's 26 markets and 39-state footprint. The streaming app is available on **Roku**, **Android TV** and **Amazon Fire TV**. The FAST channels are also available in the Very Local app and **VUit**, the free app from **Tubi** and software company **Synckbak**. They'll roll out later on the Amazon news app on Fire TV, **NewsON** and more.

MEDIA MIX FOR STREAMING CONTENT

It's no surprise, but the latest from **Conviva** solidifies it: streaming has soared over the past three years, and is up 266% globally. That's all according to the firm's 2021 Annual State of Streaming report, which also determined that social media is more connected to streaming than ever before. Social media and streaming use are complementary, with the typical streaming viewer using an average of 3.4 social media

platforms. Heavy streamers clocked in at 3.9 platforms while non-streamers used 2.3. Nearly 93% of heavy social media users said they stream via **Netflix**, but it's not the only game in town. More than half of those users also report that they stream on **Amazon Prime**, **YouTube**, **Disney+**, **Hulu** and **HBO Max**. Linear advertisements still dominate content discovery, though, as 34% of streaming viewers reported seeing an advertisement on linear TV that led them to stream content, followed by 20% who saw an advertisement on social media. With recent streaming discoveries, word of mouth drove 59% of viewers, followed by advertising (52%) and social media (49%).

STRATEGUS MOVE FOR STRATA

CTV advertising company **Strategus** and **FreeWheel** reached a deal for the former to be integrated into FreeWheel's **Strata** system. Strategus's inventory will now be available to more than 1,100 agencies via an automated workflow that allows buyers to receive proposals and send orders electronically. The enhancements will make it that much easier for CTV to be integrated into existing linear campaigns.

TIGER (STATUE) SPOTTED OUTSIDE U.N.

Discovery unveiled a large bronze tiger statue outside the UN building in Manhattan Monday. The sculpture, called "Abhaya," was created by artist *Sonny Behan* and built with the intention to celebrate and raise awareness for endangered species just ahead of the UN General Assembly's 76th session. The initiative is part of Project C.A.T. (Conserving Acres for Tigers), which Discovery launched with the World Wildlife Fund to support nearly six million acres of tiger habitat and help protect and support conservation of a transboundary tiger landscape. The goal for the company is to double the wild tiger population by 2022, the Chinese Zodiac's upcoming Year of the Tiger.

INTERNET ESSENTIALS FOR BALTIMORE CITY

Comcast is donating 3,000 new laptops and free Internet service across Baltimore City. The perks will be distributed among several organizations focused on education, digital equity and workforce development, including Digital Harbor High School. Students will receive 1,500 laptops and 12 months of free Internet service. The pledge comes as a part of Comcast's Internet Essentials program, focused on Internet adoption for low-income neighborhoods, which has connected a total of 192,000 people in Baltimore over the past decade.

PROGRAMMING

Discovery commissioned "The Men Who Sold the World Cup," a two-part film about how football's biggest competition was sold to the highest bidders. The film premieres exclusively on **discovery+** in the U.S. Oct 17.

PEOPLE

Shawn Bone, a telecom expert that has spent nearly a decade serving **Senate Commerce** Democrats, is headed to **Verizon**. *Politico* got the scoop on the move. Effective Oct 11, Bone will serve as Verizon's director, federal regulatory public policy.