

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

DID YOU KNOW?

The No. 1 question at Fiber Connect this week was why the annual FBA gathering is happening now instead of its normal June or July timeframe. “If I’ve been asked it once, I’ve been asked it a thousand times,” Graybar National Market Manager Scott Jackson said during Tuesday’s general session. “The answer is the World Cup, that’s the domino that fell.” The 2026 FIFA World Cup will be held in the U.S., Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19.

THE B-WORD AT FIBER CONNECT

What word did you hardly hear at **Fiber Connect** this week? BEAD. The Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program was the belle of the conference for several years, but delays, program changes and red tape have clipped its wings.

An on-stage game of Family Feud offered a look at how 100 network providers in attendance really view the government program. The top answer on the board for “If you could redefine what the letter B in BEAD stands for” was Bureaucratic. The teams playing guessed Boondoggle (nope) and Bullshit, which was close enough to the #3 answer of Bad. It wasn’t all negative, with Better ranking as the second most popular answer. Rounding out the top five answers were Broken and “Backhaul.”

On Tuesday, **Florida Commerce Office of Broadband** Director *Leo Garcia* gave an update on the Sunshine State’s progress. Florida’s BEAD benefit-of-the-bargain round awarded over \$220 million to provide service to approximately 75,000 locations. It’s currently working through federal environmental permitting requirements and putting the finishing touches on agreements with its provisionally awarded providers.

“We’re doing everything in our power to get through this early phase as quickly and smoothly as possible, so that we can put shovels in the ground because our priority is ensuring Floridians can feel the impact of these investments sooner rather than later,” he said, noting the state has a large balance of remaining funds for nondeployment activities.

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Like everyone else, Florida is waiting for the **NTIA's** guidance on how the estimated \$21 billion in non-deployment dollars can be used. It hopes to invest over \$110 million in "building a broadband workforce that is capable of installing the underlying infrastructure safely and efficiently, while boosting Florida's educational and telecom sectors in the process," Garcia said.

The fate of BEAD's non-deployment dollars is weighing on many Fiber Connect attendees. "We've got \$130 million sitting in the account in the state of North Dakota, and we have a shovel-rich project to increase our backbone, and we can't use those funds," said *Seth Arndorfer*, CEO of **Dakota Carrier Network**. "The market's moving faster than the government, which isn't shocking. It's just so frustrating."

David Eckard, **Nokia's** Head of Strategy for Fixed Networks, said the issue has come up in several conversations this week with many ideas of using the money for workforce development and the middle mile. "That's a chunk of change... and it would help so many small operators to deploy faster and do more with their networks," he said.

A session on accelerating network deployments touched on some of the issues that players hope those non-deployment funds address, such as permitting and training.

On permitting, the consensus advice was simple: start earlier than you think you need to. The days of a three-to-six-month lead time are gone—operators on the panel said they're now filing permits six to twelve months ahead of construction. **Buckeye Broadband** gets one-year permits, and if something changes, refiles. "When we get our initial designs, we have 100% of our permits already drafted up," CTO *Tommy Taylor* said. "There's a lot of pre-work on that design to make sure you have all those ready to go."

Some are taking workforce issues into their own hands. Buckeye has a jv with a small college in Ohio for a fiber program. Reaching young people early in their career path is key. "We need to be in the high schools, and we need to be talking about what is going on in our industry, how they're getting 1 Gig in their house, that AI comes through the skilled labor force" that they can be a part of, said *Bo Gresham*, SVP and Chief Revenue Officer for **Dycom**.

Corning VP, Market Development *Bob Whitman* offered a glimmer of hope that happened at a Fiber Connect reception the night before. "I was talking to three young graduate students who are starting a company for workforce development," he said. "We collectively are going to see these young folks come in and change the way we all do this."

LATENCY IS HARD, GAMING ISN'T

While **Charter** and **Comcast** have recently rolled out ultra-low latency internet offerings, not everyone is convinced that consumers want them or even understand what they are. "Just because our competitors are doing it doesn't mean we should, and doesn't mean it's working for them. I'd be curious to watch some of that play out, and is that winning them market share?" *Tali Kulbeda*, **Brightspeed** Head of Local Marketing & Partnerships, said during a **Fiber Con-**

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nect session. Her thinking is that latency won't sway most customers unless they have a specialized use case at home. That doesn't mean gaming isn't a valuable marketing tool. In a pilot, start-up **Powder Communications'** entry-level broadband service was dubbed "Beginner," its middle package was called "Family" and its premium broadband was named "Gamer." "We had 1 Gig service already in there, and I thought, there is no way anybody is going to do 2 Gigs. We might get 2% penetration, but it was funny because when we called it Gamer, we had a 10% penetration," said *Scott Sampson*, CEO of Powder, which partners with home builders, multifamily developers and commercial property owners to build fiber-first communities. He thinks naming it Gamer appealed not just to hardcore video gamers but also to families who saw that name, had kids who played and wanted a strong internet connection. While terms like latency and jitter may go over many consumers' heads, a network appreciated by gamers carries weight. "They are the most technically understanding. If you can get a gamer to tell others, especially on social media, that goes a long way," said *Antwon Alsobrook*, CEO of open access provider **eCommunity Holdings**. Brightspeed ran with that idea, creating a contest in North Carolina for high schools to craft the best virtual pitch explaining why they deserve to have the provider build a tech lab at their school. Kulbeda cautioned against taking the gaming tie-in too far. The first iteration of the contest was for a high school esports lab. "When you're talking about the value of gaming, gamers get it. People who are in esports see the future opportunity. Parents, head of household decision makers, they don't really love it yet," she said. "By kind of broadening the terminology around it, we could give a lot more legitimacy, interest and support to what we're trying to do. We're helping educate the community on why things like latency or jitter matter, because it's about the outcome, it's about being competitive, it's about being able to win in the space."

FIBER AT THE CENTER OF AT&T'S FUTURE

AT&T CEO *John Stankey* used an investor conference appearance to double down on the company's long-range bet that fiber-anchored convergence will separate itself from the rest of the competitive connectivity market. In his view, AT&T's reaffirmed EBITDA growth guidance of 5% by 2028 and a record first quarter for advanced broadband and connectivity net additions are pieces of evidence that the strategy is taking hold. The core remains fiber, with AT&T planning to add 7 million new passings this year amid a longer-term goal to expand its footprint to 60 million homes by 2030—a scale Stankey argues will reshape the mobile operator's churn profile as more customers bundle broadband and mobile. "When we converge a customer, we pick up a dramatic improvement in churn and longevity for that relationship," he said at Tuesday's conference. "So the math becomes: as the footprint gets larger and you get more converged customers, then you get a higher percentage of your base influence to that." Stankey also addressed investor concern that AT&T's push into value and underpenetrated segments will erode postpaid phone ARPU. However, he countered that full networks return more than partially utilized premium ones, and entry-level customer relationships are seeds. "Just because an entry-level or initiation of an account comes in a particular level doesn't mean that over time, that can't be grown into a profitable relationship," Stankey said. "The worst thing I think for a brand is to get pigeonhole as saying, it's only a brand that's accessible to those who hit a particular socioeconomic construct."

LUMOS' NEW CEO, EXPANSION AHEAD

Lumos, which became part of **T-Mobile Fiber** last year, appointed *Scott Mispagel* as CEO, succeeding *Brian Stading*, who is retiring. Mispagel, who will lead the ISP through its next phase of growth, has more than two decades of telecom experience. Where is Lumos building out next? Well, its open job postings signal it'll be adding Arkansas, Missouri and Texas to its footprint with several construction project engineer opportunities in those states. The provider connects more than 475,000 homes and businesses across a 10-state footprint (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina and Virginia). Most recently, Mispagel served as SVP, National Engineering & Operations at **Frontier Communications**, overseeing the delivery of more than 10 million fiber passings. He also previously held leadership positions at **Windstream** and **GTE**. "The opportunity ahead is tremendous, and I look forward to working with this exceptional team to continue delivering world-class fiber infrastructure to the communities we connect."

WARNER CONCERNED ABOUT TRUMP MOBILE

We've heard little about **Trump Mobile** and its gold-colored phone since the wireless service was unveiled almost a year ago. **NBC News** finally got its hands on the \$499 phone this week and went away with [questions](#) about whether the phone was even "made in the USA" as originally advertised. It's a concern shared by Sen. **Mark Warner** (D-VA) in a letter sent to Trump Mobile CEO *Patrick O'Brien* this week. "The ostensibly 'Made in America' cell phone, now appears to be a 'Made in China' phone available from online sellers for about \$175," Warner wrote, also noting that customers who pre-ordered the device waited much longer for the phone to ship than the originally promised August 2025 date. The senator said he is concerned that, while Trump Mobile has begun shipping the phone, the pre-order terms and conditions state that the wireless service may not honor customers' pre-orders "despite collecting deposits from those customers." Warner also took issue with the service's "47 Plan", which is advertised as offering unlimited talk, text and data for \$47.45/month, saying the plan contains "significant qualifiers, limitations and disclaimers" that deceive customers. He noted that the price of the plan is more than the \$40/month that **Liberty Mobile Wireless**, the MVNO powering Trump Mobile, charges for its highest-tier prepaid plan. Warner requested a response to questions about "changing claims about Trump Mobile's offerings" by May 25.

GOOGLE AI DEMAND BY THE NUMBERS

The annual **Google I/O** dev conference, where the tech company announces new products, took place Tuesday, coinciding with **Fiber Connect**, where much has been said about fiber companies' role in the AI era. As AI adoption increases, the need for a stronger infrastructure grows to power data centers. During his I/O keynote, Alphabet and Google CEO *Sundar Pichai* briefed the audience on how quickly AI usage has surged just within Google's products. By May 2024, the company was processing 9.7 trillion tokens—units of data used by AI models to process queries and generate responses—per month. Last year, that number grew to 480 trillion tokens monthly. Today, it's more than 3.2 quadrillion tokens, a 7x YOY increase in usage. Pichai joked on stage that some will say growth is due to "tokenmaxxing," where enterprise clients push employees to use as many tokens as possible in their work, but the number also accounts for Google Search's AI Overviews, which now have 2.5 billion monthly active users as well as the Gemini app's 900 million monthly active users—more than double the amount from last year. That's a lot of data moving across networks and usage is likely to continue to grow.

STARLINK PRICE INCREASE

SpaceX's Starlink is raising satellite internet prices in the U.S. and internationally. Its base 100 Mbps residential plan and the 200 Mbps tier are going up \$5 to \$55 and \$85/month, respectively, while the 400+ Mbps Max plan is now \$130/month, a \$10 increase. Standby Mode, which allows subscribers to pause their main plan while maintaining access to low-speed data for a reduced price, is doubling in price to \$10/month. Roam plans are getting a price hike, too: the 100GB tier goes from \$50 to \$55/month, while Unlimited is now \$175/month, up from \$165. The 300GB Roam plan will stick to the \$80/month price tag. Starlink said the higher rates will "support ongoing improvements and investment in affordable, high-performance products and services as global operating costs continue to rise." The increases go into effect on June 18.

DISNEY+'S HULU INTEGRATION

Disney announced last year that it planned to fully integrate **Hulu** into **Disney+**. We're already seeing some of that in motion, including plenty of the Hulu library becoming available on its sister streamer. The House of Mouse is now moving forward with the next phase. Starting today, select Hulu subs can link their profiles to Disney+, allowing them to bring over their Hulu watch history, watchlist and recommendations. Disney+ will also get a few Hulu features down the line, including Live TV channels and add-on packages. For now, the company plans to test a Live Guide on the app so users can quickly find livestreaming content from **ABC News Live**, Disney+ Playtime and **ESPN**.

PROGRAMMING

"South Park" Season 29 starts Sept. 16 at 10pm on Comedy Central and streaming the next day on Paramount+.