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Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler said he'll leave office Jan. 20 as Donald Trump is sworn in as U.S. president, as the agency passes into the hands of Republicans hostile to regulations passed by Democrats including the net-neutrality rule. "Serving as FCC chairman during this period of historic technological change has been the greatest honor of my professional life. I am deeply grateful to the president for giving me this opportunity," Wheeler said in a statement.



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2018. His departure will leave three seats to be filled by candidates nominated by Trump and confirmed by the Senate: a Republican to give the party a third seat on the five-member panel, and Democrats to replace Wheeler and Jessica Rosenworcel, who didn't win confirmation to a second term before the Senate adjourned last week.

It's unclear whether the agency will take up AT&T's proposed \$85.4 billion purchase of HBO and CNN owner Time Warner Inc. The companies are assessing whether to retain the FCC licenses that would give the agency jurisdiction over the deal, AT&T Chief Executive Officer Randall Stephenson said at a congressional hearing on Dec. 7. Trump hasn't said who he's considering to lead the agency, which assesses mergers in the communications industry and regulates cable, wireless and

The departure of Wheeler, a Democrat, will set the commission up for a 2-1 majority of Republicans eager to begin pruning. "We need to fire up the weed whacker," Ajit Pai, the agency's senior Republican who may become acting chairman upon Wheeler's departure, said in a Dec. 7 speech. Rules at risk include the net-neutrality regulation passed by Democrats in 2015 at President Barack Obama's urging, which limits how internet service providers led by AT&T Inc. and Comcast Corp. handle web traffic. Other targets include privacy rules imposing obligations on carriers such as AT&T Inc. and Verizon Communications Inc., and ownership rules that restrict TV-station combinations by companies such as Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc.

Wheeler, 70, could have chosen to remain a commissioner, without the presidential designation as chairman, until his term runs out in

broadcast companies. The FCC employs about 1,650 people and requested a budget of \$358 million for fiscal 2017, down 7 percent from 2016. – **Bloomberg**

In 2016, computer use is nearly as much a part of everyday life as running water and electricity. We've come to expect Internet access, just as we assume lights will come on when we throw a switch or water will flow from the faucet when we open a spigot. We can bank, shop, receive medical care, find employment, interact with government and run businesses online.

Our students learn in the same fashion. Many of us are reluctant to face that fact, as evidenced by our hesitancy to acknowledge the many changes in technology. In this day and age, the Internet often drives those changes and access to it is virtually a "must have." Experts estimate that by the year 2020, there will be more than 50 billion devices connected via the Internet in the United States.

"Highways" are required in order to facilitate those connections. In 1993, Bell Atlantic Corp. (which merged with GTE Corp. in 2000 to become Verizon Communications) signed an agreement with the Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission to "deploy the technologies necessary to provide universal broadband availability in the year 2015." It was Bell's intent to create a "broadband network using fiber optics or other comparable technology that is capable of supporting services requiring bandwidth of at least 45 megabits per second or its equivalent." That intended action was put into statute when Act 183 of 2004 required telecommunication companies to offer broadband service to all customers by Dec. 31, 2015.

Nearly one year after such a network was to be in place, there is debate over whether or not the requirements of Act 183 have been fulfilled. Ask residents of Delta, Fawn Grove or Hopewell Township who frequent the South Eastern School District parking lot. They are simply accessing the district's wi-fi to help their children with school work that can't be done at home due to lack of Internet access (some residents of Springfield and York townships in the Dallastown Area School District are forced to do the same thing).

Some of you no doubt have problems with increased reliance on students' ability to learn and do homework being dependent on their ability to work online. Internet access is as much a staple now as pens and paper were in the past. It is a fact that more and more schools are relying on technology like Blackboard, where everything from classroom assignments to messaging between pupil and teacher is accomplished without face-to-face contact. These digital opportunities create equity of access to educational resources for all students that enables our schools to meet the constitutional obligation of a thorough and efficient education for all students.

The question remains, has the promise of Internet accessibility been kept in Pennsylvania? Verizon said last year about half of more than 4 million households in its service area have access to the fiber network and the others have DSL (digital service line) or LTE (long-term evolution) broadband options from which to choose. There are also semantics involved that toy with the definition of "high-speed Internet." An informal survey of South Eastern School District staff alone revealed a number of homes lack basic Internet access other than satellite service.

For me, the evidence that a promise has been broken lies in the people whose tax dollars support their child's education and Pennsylvanians – especially Verizon customers – who are seeking justification for paying a higher monthly bill. Schools' use of the latest technology is dependent on infrastructure being in place to support them. Without that infrastructure, families are being inconvenienced and taxpayers are being cheated.

This situation was brought to my attention, and I appreciate the residents of the 93rd Legislative District who did so. I'm sure it is of small comfort, but there are other areas of the state and our nation that are also dealing with this situation. I can tell you I have been in constant contact with Verizon's government relations representative. We are attempting to work through this problem, get some answers and resolve this problem.

Action needs to be taken at every level of government to close the digital divide and bring equal Internet access to rural Pennsylvania. The first step is to accurately identify the "holes" in coverage. If you live in an area that lacks access to the Internet, please contact your state representative. Further, we need to create the Commonwealth Connectivity Act to promote the deployment of broadband conduits as part of our state-funded transportation projects to stimulate development to our rural areas. If we want students who learn and residents who work, the General Assembly must commit to working to close the gaps that exist in Internet service in rural Pennsylvania. – **Op-ed by Rep. Kristin Phillips-Hill (R-York) in *York Daily Record***

AT&T is getting criticism from some consumer and public advocacy groups after it said it won't participate in a government subsidy program that cut the cost of broadband internet for low-income families. The Dallas-based telecom company is one of 86 providers that have sent a letter to the Federal Communications Commission to opt out of the broadband part of the [Lifeline program](#). The program helps to cover the cost of landline and mobile phone services that poor families use to connect with jobs, family or emergency services. It was recently expanded to include broadband internet as a way to close the digital divide. The change took effect Dec. 1.

But AT&T said its own low-cost broadband program -- called [Access from AT&T](#) -- is a better way to achieve universal internet access. In a post on its [public policy blog](#), the company said broadband should be a part of Lifeline, but said the program's current structure puts the administrative burden on providers. AT&T declined to comment for this story. It would not say how many people participate in the Access program.

AT&T started Access from AT&T in April, a program that connects poor Americans to low-speed internet for \$10 or less per month. The FCC required the program as a condition of last year's AT&T-DirecTV merger. To qualify for Access, households must have at least one resident who participates in the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, and must live in the 21-state area where AT&T provides home internet service.

But AT&T's decision to opt out of Lifeline's broadband program has frustrated consumer advocates like Jessica Gonzalez, executive vice president and general counsel of California-based [National Hispanic Media Coalition](#). She said AT&T and other large broadband providers should participate because "it's the right thing to do and it demonstrates corporate responsibility." She said corporate programs like Access by AT&T often require credit checks or have much narrower criteria for eligibility. And she said programs often disappear as soon as FCC merger conditions expire. Other public advocacy groups have also criticized AT&T's filing, including the Greenlining Institute, The United Church of Christ, the National Consumer Law Center, and the Benton Foundation, according to a report by *Fortune*.

Lifeline began in 1985 as a way to make telephone service more affordable for poor Americans to connect to jobs, family and emergency services. It was expanded to cover wireless service, such as prepaid cell phones and texting, under President George W. Bush and this year, the FCC announced an expansion to cover broadband internet service. About 13.4 million Americans - including 720,000 Texans -- receive subsidized phone service through the program, according to 2014 data from the FCC. AT&T is the third largest Lifeline carrier in the country, after America Movil (which includes the brands TracFone and Straight Talk) and Softbank Group (the majority owner of Sprint), according to the FCC.

Each eligible household gets a \$9.25 per month subsidy for phone or internet services. The government pays the subsidy to the carrier, who then sends a lower bill. When it announced the broadband expansion, the FCC said it would also modernize the Lifeline program by creating the National Eligibility Verifier, a third-party electronic system that would check a customer's qualifications and help fight abuse and fraud.

The verification system won't be rolled out to every state until 2019. That's one of the reasons why AT&T said it would not participate. "It makes little sense to spend resources on implementation of soon-to-be-replaced administrative rules for a new service when we are already offering low-income consumers a better deal through our Access from AT&T program," wrote Joan Marsh, senior vice president of AT&T's Washington, D.C. lobbying team on AT&T's public policy blog.

Gonzalez of the National Hispanic Media Coalition said she's skeptical that's the reason why the company is opting out. "If that's truly the barrier, AT&T should commit that when that [the verification system] is up and running, they will provide broadband throughout their footprint," she said. "But they haven't." -- *Dallas Morning News*

Shares of Charter Communications are up 3.7 percent over the last two days since Verizon Chief Executive Lowell McAdam told a group of Wall Street analysts that it made "industrial sense" for his telecom to buy John Malone's cable operation. McAdam, however, did not say he was thinking of making a move on Charter or that there was any interest from Malone's company.

In fact, McAdam, according to sources at the discussion, said the amount of debt Verizon would have to raise to do such a deal could be an issue. Plus, the regulatory environment under a Trump administration would have to be sussed out, he said. Charter's shares closed Wednesday at \$288.26 — and are up 18 percent since late October.

Verizon could be prompted to buy Charter by its rival AT&T, which not only owns DirecTV but also has an agreement to acquire Time Warner for \$109 billion in a cash and stock deal. McAdam is obsessed with distribution, said a person familiar with his thinking. Verizon in April sold most of its Fios network to Frontier Communications, clearing the path, some believe, to allow a cable merger. "For regulatory reasons, Verizon can't dominate in Fios and cable, so it appears to have to set its sights on cable," an industry source said.

Charter could be a seller under the right conditions, the source added, emphasizing that Malone and Charter [CEO] Tom Rutledge are just getting going on their vision for Charter. But it does mean Verizon has to promise enough autonomy for the Charter team to advance its own plans — only if "Malone and Rutledge are not ready to cash out," the source said. Verizon did not return calls. — ***New York Post***



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