

The Tech Chronicles

Broadband activists to FCC: Hold Comcast accountable before Time-Warner deal

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As part of its takeover of NBC-Universal in 2010, Comcast promised Federal Communications regulators that it would help give low-income residents better access to broadband, offering a bridge across the digital divide.

But a coalition of California activists said Tuesday that the cable giant has fallen far short of building that bridge.

And now, with Comcast coming back to the FCC to bless its \$45 billion takeover of Time-Warner Cable, Inc., the activists want the federal agency to start demanding that Comcast do more to help low-income folks get access to broadband. A Field Poll released this month showed that one in four Californians doesn't have access to broadband — a disparity that only exacerbates the state's widening wealth gap.



Comcast CEO Brian Roberts

“Our nation’s economic well-being and ability to compete globally are at risk unless we get all residents connected to high-speed broadband at home. Now is the time to hold Comcast accountable for delivering a real, measurable public benefit,” according to a letter sent to the FCC Tuesday, and signed by 21 organizations and broadband access leaders, including Sunne Wright McPeak of the San Francisco-based nonpartisan California Emerging

Technology Fund. The Fund and its nonprofit partners have been helping eligible low-income families living in Comcast service areas in California to sign up.

Federal law demands that there must be some sort of public benefit to approve the Comcast-Time-Warner deal and the accompanying exchange of service territory with Charter Communications. Three years ago, as part of the NBC-Universal deal, Comcast proposed its Comcast Internet Essentials program to satisfy that requirement by offering broadband to low-income households, which it defined in part by whether a student in the home was eligible for the government’s free/reduced lunch program. Comcast’s program costs \$9.95 a month until a student graduates high school or is no longer eligible for the school lunch program. If they sign up, they get a \$150 voucher for a computing device.

But activists say the public benefit that Comcast promised before its last deal was approved didn’t help many low income people. Plus, said McPeak’s organization, “Comcast makes the sign-up process long and cumbersome. The application process often takes 2-3 months, far too long for customers who are skeptical about the product in the first place, and have other pressing demands on their budgets.”

Over the past 3 years, according to The California Emerging Technology Fund, “Comcast has signed up only 11 percent of the eligible households in California and the nation. In California, the company says it has signed 35,205 households for Internet Essentials out of more than 313,000 eligible families.”

At that rate, the Fund said:



“It would take another decade for Comcast to reach just half of the currently-eligible population. Further, conservative analysis indicates that if the acquisition is approved, an estimated 1.375 million California households (more than 3 million K-12 students—87 percent of all California students qualifying for free and reduced lunch) would be eligible for Internet Essentials in the new combined service territory of approximately 3.7 million households (including Charter Communications subscribers whom Comcast intends to acquire in a swap if the acquisition is approved.)”

Last week, former FCC Commissioner Michael Copps — who was the only commissioner to vote against Comcast’s 2010 deal — told *The Chronicle* that he would vote against this one, too.

“This deal should be dead on arrival. We have no business doing this after Comcast I. And now, to take this footprint that Comcast has developed over so much of the rest of the United States and impose it on so many other subscribers and so many other areas is totally inimical to the public interest. I don’t see any conditions that would be ameliorative of that, that would make it acceptable to the public interest.”

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