

After net neutrality: Brace for internet ‘fast lanes’

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NEW YORK — Now that federal telecom regulators have repealed net neutrality, it may be time to brace for the arrival of internet “fast lanes” and “slow lanes.”

The net neutrality rules just voted down by the Federal Communications Commission prohibited such “paid prioritization,” as it’s technically known. That’s when an internet provider such as Verizon or Comcast decides to charge services like YouTube or Amazon for faster access to users. Firms that decline to pay up could wind up in bumper-to-bumper slow lanes.

The Associated Press queried seven major internet providers about their post-net-neutrality plans, and all of them equivocated when asked if they might establish fast and slow lanes. None of the seven companies — Verizon, AT&T, Comcast, Charter, Cox, Sprint and T-Mobile — would rule out the possibility. Three said they had “no plans” for paid prioritization, and a few declined to answer the question at all.

By contrast, several of these firms promised not to block or slow down specific internet sites and services, two other practices prohibited by the expiring net-neutrality rules. (Those rules won’t formally end until sometime in early 2018.) Any such move could set off a public uproar and might even trigger an antitrust investigation.

Here are the net-neutrality promises from the country’s biggest wireless and cable companies.

VERIZON
FAST LANES: No specific response
BLOCK OR SLOW SITES:



This 2015 file photo, shows the entrance to the Federal Communications Commission building in Washington. Now that federal telecom regulators have repealed net neutrality, it may be time to brace for the arrival of internet “fast lanes” and “slow lanes.”

Says it doesn’t do so, but declined to address the future

THE WORDS: In a Nov. 21 statement, Verizon senior vice president Kathy Grillo said: “We continue to believe that users should be able to access the internet when, where, and how they choose, and our customers will continue to do so.” Asked whether Verizon will continue not to block or throttle content or whether it will charge internet companies to get better access to customers, Young said Verizon “does not block or throttle content and that’s the bottom line.”

AT&T
FAST LANES: No specific

response
BLOCK OR SLOW SITES:

Says it “will not” do so
THE WORDS: Spokesman Mike Balmoris didn’t specifically answer when asked if AT&T will create fast lanes. In a Nov. 30 blog post, AT&T senior executive vice president Bob Quinn said: “We will not block websites, we will not throttle or degrade internet traffic based on content, and we will not unfairly discriminate in our treatment of internet traffic.”

COMCAST
FAST LANES: Has “no plans” to create them
BLOCK OR SLOW SITES:

Says it “will not” do so

THE WORDS: In a Dec. 14 blog post, senior executive vice president David Cohen said: “We will not block, throttle, or discriminate against lawful content on the Internet; we will be fully transparent with respect to our practices; and we have not entered into any paid prioritization arrangements, and we have no plans to do so.”

CHARTER
FAST LANES: Says there are no plans to create them
BLOCK OR SLOW SITES: Says it doesn’t do so and has “no plans” to change that
THE WORDS: In a Dec. 14 blog

post: “We don’t slow down, block, or discriminate against lawful content. Simply put, we don’t interfere with the lawful online practices of our customers and we have no plans to change our practices.”

COX
FAST LANES: Does not plan to create them

BLOCK OR SLOW SITES: Says it doesn’t do so and has no plans to

THE WORDS: In an emailed statement on Dec. 14: “We do not block, throttle or otherwise interfere with consumers’ desire to go where they want on the Internet.” A spokesman said the company has no plans to block or throttle content or enter into paid prioritization agreements.

SPRINT
FAST LANES: No specific response

BLOCK OR SLOW SITES: Says it doesn’t block sites, but didn’t answer questions about the future

THE WORDS: In a press release on Dec. 14, Sprint wrote: “Our position has been and continues to be that competition is the best way to promote an open internet.”

From its “open internet” website: “Sprint does not block sites based on content or subject.”

T-MOBILE
FAST LANES: No response about future plans

BLOCK OR SLOW SITES: No response about future plans

THE WORDS: A company spokeswoman pointed to a February 2015 statement from T-Mobile CEO John Legere: “We have always believed in competition and in a free, open Internet with rules that protect net neutrality — no blocking, no discrimination and transparency.”

BRIEFLY

Overdose deaths cut U.S. life expectancy for 2nd year

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. deaths from drug overdoses skyrocketed 21 percent last year, and for the second straight year dragged down how long Americans are expected to live.

The government figures released Thursday put drug deaths at 63,600, up from about 52,000 in 2015. For the first time, the powerful painkiller fentanyl and its close opioid cousins played a bigger role in the deaths than any other legal or illegal drug, surpassing prescription pain pills and heroin.

“This is urgent and deadly,” said Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The opioid epidemic “clearly has a huge impact on our entire society.”

Two-thirds of last year’s drug deaths — about 42,000 — involved opioids, a category that includes heroin, methadone, prescription pain pills like OxyContin, and fentanyl. Fatal overdoses that involved fentanyl and fentanyl-like drugs doubled in one year, to more than 19,000, mostly from illegally made pills or powder, which is often mixed with heroin or other drugs.

Heroin was tied to 15,500 deaths and prescription painkillers to 14,500 deaths. The balance of the overdose deaths involved sedatives, cocaine and methamphetamines. More than one drug is often involved in an overdose death.

Al Franken to officially leave U.S. Senate seat on Jan. 2

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Sen. Al Franken plans to officially leave the U.S. Senate on Jan. 2.

The announcement Wednesday from a Franken spokesman should put to rest questions surrounding the timing of the Minnesota Democrat’s departure and concern that he might reverse his planned resignation.

Franken announced earlier this month that he would leave “in the coming weeks” amid several sexual misconduct allegations. His office later indicated it would come sometime in early January.

Gov. Mark Dayton’s choice to replace Franken, Lt. Gov. Tina Smith, is set to be sworn in Jan. 3.

Smith will keep some of Franken’s top staff when she takes office. She plans to run for the seat in 2018.

With shutdown clock ticking, GOP struggles to make a deal

WASHINGTON (AP) — With a shutdown clock ticking toward a midnight Friday deadline, House Republican leaders struggled on Wednesday to unite the GOP rank and file behind a must-pass spending bill.

Although a major obstacle evaporated after key GOP senators dropped a demand to add health insurance subsidies for the poor, a number of defense hawks offered resistance to a plan by GOP leaders to punt a guns-versus-butter battle with Democrats into the new year.

There’s still plenty of time to avert a politically debilitating government shutdown, which would detract from the party’s success this week in muscling through their landmark tax bill.

Some lawmakers from hurricane-hit states also worried that an \$81 billion disaster aid bill was at risk of getting left behind in the

rush to exit Washington for the holidays.

Lawmakers said the GOP vote-counting team would assess support for the plan and GOP leaders would set a course of action from there.

Rules Committee Chairman Pete Sessions, R-Texas, said “there’s no specific direction right now” about the path forward. He spoke after an hourlong closed-door meeting of Republicans in the Capitol basement.

An earlier plan favored by pro-Pentagon members of the influential Armed Services Committee would have combined the stopgap funding bill with a \$658 billion Pentagon funding measure. But the idea is a nonstarter with the Senate, especially Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

EPA says Superfund Task Force left little paper trail

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency says an internal task force appointed to revamp how the nation’s most polluted sites are cleaned up generated no record of its deliberations.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt in May announced the creation of a Superfund Task Force that he said would reprioritize and streamline procedures for remediating more than 1,300 sites. Pruitt, the former attorney general of Oklahoma, appointed a political supporter from his home state with no experience in pollution cleanups to lead the group.

The task force in June issued a nearly three dozen-page report containing 42 detailed recommendations, all of which Pruitt immediately adopted. The advocacy group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, known as PEER, quickly filed a Freedom of Information Act request seeking a long list of documents related to the development of Pruitt’s plan.

After EPA didn’t immediately release any records, PEER sued.

Now, nearly six months after the task force released its report, a lawyer for EPA has written PEER to say that the task force had no agenda for its meetings, kept no minutes and used no reference materials.

Further, there were no written criteria for selecting the 107 EPA employees the agency says served on the task force or background materials distributed to them during the deliberative process for creating the recommendations.

According to EPA, the task force also created no work product other than its final report.

“Pruitt’s plan for cleaning up toxic sites was apparently immaculately conceived, without the usual trappings of human parentage,” said Jeff Ruch, the executive director of PEER. “It stretches credulity that 107 EPA staff members with no agenda or reference materials somehow wrote an intricate plan in 30 days.”

Tie vote declared in pivotal Virginia House district

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — A court has now declared a tie in a Virginia legislative election that one day earlier appeared to have gone to a Democrat by a single vote, the latest dramatic twist in a contest likely to decide control of the state House.

A three-judge panel certified the 94th District in Newport News as tied at 11,608 to 11,608 on Wednesday, a day after a recount appeared to give Democrat Shelly Simonds

the victory over Republican Del. David Yancey.

Citing state election law, Virginia Board of Elections Chairman James Alcorn said the board would have to pick a winner at random, likely picking a name from a bowl.

In a statement, the Virginia House Democratic Caucus called the court’s decision “wrong” and said, “We are currently assessing all legal options before us as we fight for a just result.”

Reached by phone, Yancey said he was “just grateful that every vote was counted.” The Republican said he’s preparing legislation for the next session.

Israel, U.S. team up to block UN vote on Jerusalem

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel is intensively lobbying countries around the world to oppose a U.N. resolution criticizing President Donald Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Israeli officials said Wednesday.

Thursday’s vote in the U.N. General Assembly will indicate whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has succeeded in his efforts to drum up new pockets of support in the developing world, as well as the extent to which Israel and the U.S. are — or are not — alone on the question of Jerusalem.

The Palestinians have turned to the General Assembly after the U.S. vetoed a resolution this week in the Security

Council calling on Trump to rescind his decision. While General Assembly votes, unlike Security Council resolutions, are not legally binding, they serve as a barometer of international sentiment on key issues.

The U.S. and Israel are both placing great weight on Thursday’s vote. U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley threatened U.N. member states with possible retaliation if they support the resolution, saying Trump takes the vote “personally” and the U.S. “will be taking names.”

Trump went even further, telling reporters at a Cabinet meeting in Washington that opponents were likely to face a cutoff in U.S. funding. “For all these nations, they take our money and then vote against us,” Trump said. “We’re watching those votes. Let them vote against us. We’ll save a lot. We don’t care.”

The comments brought accusations of U.S. intimidation.

Israel’s deputy foreign minister, Tzipi Hotovely, said that the U.S. and Israel were making “immense efforts” to block the resolution.

“We have a very, very simple message: Jerusalem is the capital of the Jewish people for 3,000 years and the capital of Israel for almost 70 years,” she told Channel 10.

An Israeli Foreign Ministry official confirmed the government was making a “very vast” lobbying campaign to minimize the resolution’s impact.

He said Israel is trying to persuade allies to abstain or even vote against it.

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