

What's at the 2016 Summit?

Financial, economic, technical and demographic indicators point to 2016 setting records for ultra-broadband deployments.

By Steven S. Ross / *Broadband Communities*

As regular attendees know, every **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** Summit brings unexpected twists, excitement and opportunities for wheeling and dealing. As BBC staff and all-star industry panels began to work on the 2016 program, excitement grew. How could we include all the information? We added more tracks and more days, of course, and created new panels that combine seemingly diverse ideas. Attendees can find activities from Monday morning, April 4, through Thursday afternoon, April 7.

All segments of the industry are feeding off one another. Startups as well as incumbents such as AT&T, CenturyLink and Verizon all subscribe to the idea that no bandwidth is ever enough. They are joined by traditional cable companies armed with a new technology – DOCSIS 3.1 – whose evolutionary name hides a revolutionary idea: Cable companies can now easily bring fiber to living units.

Wall Street can now measure risks and revenue potential. That has brought numerous investment firms (including some giants) into the game. **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES'** phones now ring off the hook (well, off the charging cradles) with a steady flow of inquiries from investment funds and analysts. Yes, incumbents still want to milk or sell obsolete networks, especially in rural areas, and they sometimes seek to block competitors at the same time.

But those days appear numbered, which is stimulating a wave of mergers and divestitures. DIRECTV and AT&T. TWC and Charter. Cablevision and Altice. Verizon spinoffs, especially Frontier, getting fatter. Major cellular carriers selling their cell towers.

There's more financing for developers to build networks in old or new apartment communities. There are more options for municipalities – they can build and run their own networks, build and farm out operations to third parties, cooperate with nearby telcos or cable companies, partake of state funds, reinvest cash flow from their water or electrical systems. There are more options for established carriers – they can build, lease, or co-own with established third parties, and they can cooperate – for instance, to snag cellular signals from other carriers on their customers' Wi-Fi.

Make no mistake: Financing drives network construction. But new technology and new revenue opportunities drive favorable financing opportunities with more revenue potential and faster routes to cash flow breakeven.

Aside from DOCSIS 3.1, there are new in-unit wireless gateways. The mobile revolution. The Internet of Things. New broadband services.

Result: More power than ever is in the hands of consumers, who choose not to pay for services they don't need but step up to pay handsomely for things they can't do without. In a single building, owners will find cord cutters, cellular-onlies, gigabit users, sports and online gaming addicts, families with kids who need access to school networks. All these groups are experiencing massive growth in 2016.

Cable companies are overbuilding old coax with fiber. Some property owners add fiber and expect cable companies, telcos and others to share it – and to support building access control, fire safety, energy management and more.

In-building networks are becoming more and more reliant on wireless gateways, especially since 802.11ac routers appeared a year ago. Another new router generation is about to be unleashed. Should a property owner join in? Coordinate all gateways with a box in the basement for better security and reliability? In that case, what's the best way to control tenants who bring their own gateways?

New, energy-efficient building materials block cellular signals from building interiors. How do cellular and landline providers handle that? What if they can't? Does a building need great broadband service but not at the price of plowing 3,000 feet of fiber through difficult terrain? Millimeter-wave wireless might be a great temporary solution.

Consumers once measured network quality only by its video lineup and Super Bowl viewing quality. Now they want reliable, low-latency, symmetrical broadband. They don't *know* they want it; they don't even know what the terms mean. But they know how to complain when service doesn't meet their expectations.

Traditional content providers are in turmoil, reducing the pricing power that had bled network operators. HBO, CBS and many others are offering video over the top. ESPN is losing dominance and pricing power. The FCC is finally getting tougher (maybe) with rapacious local "must carry" broadcasters.

Summit 2016 covers all the new action in a way that owners, managers, real estate developers, public officials and citizen activists can understand. ❖

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