

Broadband Technology and Connectivity Take Center Stage at The NMHC 2019 OPTECH Show

As renters continue to acquire more connected devices, it's clear that the role of network connectivity is changing the dynamics of the multifamily housing industry. New trends will be highlighted at the NMHC OPTECH Conference & Exposition this November.

By Kevin Donnelly / *National Multifamily Housing Council*

Changing demographics and consumer preferences are driving unprecedented demand for rental housing and fueling the multifamily industry's growth. Investors, owners and developers of apartments are building new apartment communities and rehabbing existing properties to meet this growing desire for healthier, more personalized, flexible and – perhaps most important – connected homes.

Nine out of 10 apartment renters rank high-speed internet in the top five must-have features in their apartments, according to the new 2020 National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC)/Kingsley Renter Preferences Survey. In fact, nearly half said they would not rent an apartment without it. At the same time, renters report having more connected devices, and interest in smart-home features, from smart lights and locks to internet-enabled fridges and dynamic glass, continues to grow.

Getting connectivity right is an imperative in today's apartment market. With broadband infrastructure now serving as the real backbone of multifamily communities, we're seeing more innovation enter the space. Moreover, apartment firms are more focused than ever on the related design, financial and technical considerations, and regulatory challenges.

But the broadband landscape is changing rapidly. 5G is coming. Wi-Fi is everywhere. New solutions are appearing. Rules are changing. That's why the NMHC OPTECH Conference & Exposition (November 11–13 in Dallas) will explore many of the topics and issues discussed at the 2019 **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** Summit in Austin earlier this year. From smart communities to emerging legal challenges and beyond, attendees will dig into the key issues at the nexus of broadband and multifamily.

Here is a sneak peek at some of the topics we'll discuss.

RENTER CONNECTIVITY PREFERENCES

At OPTECH, we will release results from the new 2020 NMHC/Kingsley Renter Preferences Survey – a landmark study of nearly 373,000 apartment renters across the country. This is the largest survey of apartment residents in existence, providing the industry the most comprehensive data on what residents like, love and won't rent without.

This survey includes data on many connectivity topics – the number of internet-connected devices apartment dwellers own; preferred video media sources; use of voice-activated technology and virtual assistants; and interest in smart thermostats, locks, lighting

and even glass. Moreover, the results also offer insight into what apartment renters might be willing to pay monthly for some of these features, amenities and services.

INTELLIGENT BUILDINGS

Though much of the conversation around the internet of things (IoT) in multifamily has centered on consumer-focused, smart-home devices, that conversation is not only changing but also broadening quickly. From new sensor technology to more mobile and user-friendly building management systems, the options for monitoring and running multifamily buildings have never been greater.

These new technologies help reduce operational and energy waste, help create predictable maintenance plans, and may even lower multifamily firms' insurance premiums. However, when putting this level of smart technology in the field, due diligence is critical. There's a balance to strike between finding solutions that work for apartment companies and residents and identifying ones that offer integration best practices that streamline operations and ensure the best results.

TELECOM INFRASTRUCTURE

Given the critical role connectivity plays in almost all lines of operation in the multifamily industry, let alone the massive priority it is for ensuring resident satisfaction, multifamily firms are ever more invested in their telecom and broadband infrastructure. But getting the infrastructure right can be tricky when there's a growing list of options – from distributed antenna systems (DAS) and Wi-Fi booster installations to other cutting-edge solutions.

Whether for existing buildings or new builds, multifamily firms are devoting more time and resources to finding the infrastructure solutions that fit their company, building and resident profiles, while providing the most return on investment.

CONSUMER DATA PROTECTIONS

Multifamily property operations rely heavily on sensitive resident data. Layer on a move toward greater smart-home technology adoption and an embrace of artificial intelligence and virtual reality technologies (and their accompanying data generation), and data security and privacy become serious multifamily concerns.

Moreover, with the European Union's adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation and California's approval of the California Consumer Privacy Act and with relationships between Big Tech and lawmakers eroding, the need for stronger data and privacy protections for consumers across the country is clear. The real-world consequences for multifamily operators who are sloppy with data are significant, so multifamily firms are moving now to put stronger data safeguards in place.

BROADBAND LEGAL ISSUES

With significant broadband-related regulatory challenges coming out of Washington, the NMHC is closely coordinating with other real estate trade groups and property owners to counter a move by the FCC to further regulate provider marketing, revenue share, wiring, rooftop and

DAS agreements. These changes in policy and regulation pose significant threats to the current state of play in multifamily broadband.

Together, this coalition continues to educate the FCC about the multifamily industry and the real-world challenges apartment firms face in boosting connectivity, while communicating that broadband deployment and access in multifamily environments is driven by innovation and a desire to provide residents with superior broadband service and choice whenever possible.

MORE TO SEE AND LEARN

Beyond these five hot topics of discussion, OPTECH is a great place to connect with the leading executives sitting at the crossroads of multifamily and broadband. In addition to both structured and casual networking opportunities, the conference also features a Telecom Town Hall.

This is a fast-paced interactive session that covers a lot of ground, including the latest trends and developments in 5G, new fiber rollouts, Citizens Broadband Radio Service, the promise of Wi-Fi 6, and what it all means for multifamily.

Moreover, we host a series of peer roundtables – including one on smart communities – that provide an opportunity for facilitated discussion and additional solutions sourcing on a variety of issues.

The multifamily industry faces an immense slate of issues surrounding connectivity and broadband deployment. However, through stronger partnerships with broadband providers and supplier partners, innovative solutions can be deployed across property types. With a shift in how consumers access media and increasingly rely on the internet for basic functions, too much is at stake not to keep broadband connectivity a top priority for the apartment industry.

Please come and be part of the dialogue. ❖

Kevin Donnelly is vice president of government affairs at the National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC) in Washington, D.C. He can be reached at kdonnelly@nmhc.org.

OPTECH AT A GLANCE

Who? Broadband providers, supplier partners and multifamily owners, developers and managers

What? OPTECH is the leading multifamily conference dedicated to all things operations and technology. From emerging trends and technologies to new research, guidance and best practices, the conference provides critical information and an unparalleled networking experience for everyone whose portfolio includes multifamily.

When? November 11–13, 2019

Where? Dallas, Texas

Register at nmhc.org/optech