

Comcast customers won't need cable box with upcoming apps

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This Thursday, July 23, 2015, file photo, shows the Comcast building sign at Rockefeller Center, in New York. Comcast says later in 2016 you won't need a cable box to watch cable as the company follows its rivals in offering TV-watching apps. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, File)

Comcast says later this year you won't need a cable box to watch cable as the company follows its rivals in offering TV-watching apps.

The announcement has interesting timing. It comes as the federal government works on new rules that would force the TV industry to let tech companies—say, TiVo or Google—sell cable boxes, too. Consumers typically pay cable companies extra fees for these boxes, and the cable industry is opposed to the effort. The industry says apps that companies are rolling out show that the Federal Communications Commission doesn't need to act.

Comcast is going to launch an app on the streaming-TV gadget Roku that takes the place of a cable box. Time Warner Cable and Charter, which is buying Time Warner Cable, also have Roku apps that sub for cable boxes. Time Warner Cable's is only available in and near New York City. Comcast is also working on a cable-TV app for Samsung smart TVs.

Comcast doesn't say when the apps will be available. Only people in places where Comcast provides cable service could get it, but they don't have to get Comcast internet too.

Comcast Corp. has already played with delivering cable service without a box. It has a TV service for phones, computers and tablets called Stream that is, for now, available only in and around Boston and Chicago.

Stream has raised the hackles of net-neutrality advocates because using it doesn't count against the data caps that Comcast has in some areas—they think this could make customers prefer Comcast's own TV service over, say, streaming Netflix, which would count against a cap. (Net neutrality is the concept that internet service providers should treat all traffic equally.)

The upcoming Comcast TV apps also wouldn't count against a Comcast internet data cap, which is usually 300 gigabytes. If you go over it, you

pay extra.

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