

FirstNet: Mississippi halts BTOP program, Motorola Solutions accused of unsavory lobbying

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Frustrated over lack of access to 700 MHz spectrum now under the control of the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet), Mississippi's Wireless Communications Commission froze construction on its \$56 million LTE network for public safety, a project that was nearly 80 percent complete.

"We cannot operate the system without spectrum," Vicki Helfrich, the wireless commission's executive officer, told the *Sun Herald*.

Motorola Solutions is [supplying](#) Mississippi's public-safety broadband network. The vendor has recently been accused of trying to derail FirstNet through a concerted lobbying campaign.

The Executive Office of the State of Mississippi was one of seven Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant recipients whose funding was halted last year by the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration due to concerns the BTOP public-safety projects might be incompatible with the nationwide public safety broadband network being crafted by FirstNet.

To restart funding, the BTOPs must finalize lease agreements with FirstNet to use its 700 MHz spectrum and win approval for their individual projects from NTIA, which oversees FirstNet.

The latest spectrum-lease negotiation deadline expired July 12, with only the Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications System Authority (LA-RICS) gaining access to FirstNet's 700 MHz frequencies. Since then, FirstNet has not officially extended the negotiations deadline, which has been extended twice before. A FirstNet official who requested anonymity told the *Sun Herald* the board is expected to extend the negotiations deadline into August.

It is unclear whether Motorola Solutions influenced Mississippi's decision to suspend its LTE network rollout. The move might have been unavoidable given that the state's wireless commission faces a significant shortfall in its operating budget.

"Motorola Solutions remains committed to supporting the state of Mississippi on this project, and we're hopeful for a successful outcome as the state continues discussions with FirstNet. The experience gained from early public safety LTE broadband deployments such as Mississippi's would be a significant benchmark for FirstNet and the nation's public safety community," said company spokesman Tom McMahon in an email to *FierceBroadbandWireless*.

According to two articles in *Politico*, the company has lobbied certain Republican state attorneys general to oppose the nationwide network and has also encouraged firefighters and police officers to criticize FirstNet. Among other things, Motorola Solutions is said to have supplied first responders with a sample letter that charges FirstNet with disregarding public-safety needs, lacking transparency and exhibiting conflicts of interest.

Those charges echo similar allegations voiced by FirstNet board member Paul Fitzgerald during the group's April 23 meeting, which resulted in creation of an internal Special Review Committee, headed by board member Wellington Webb, a Democrat and former mayor of Denver.

Politico implied that Motorola Solutions is concerned about losing its traditional public-safety communications revenues to companies that supply networks to commercial wireless operators, which the news site said have "significant openings to ink new business" from FirstNet.

Independent consultant Michael Myers recently contended in his *Advancing Telecom* blog, "FirstNet has positioned themselves to give the \$7 billion in taxpayer money to help harden the carrier class networks so that they can install their own antennas then interface with the commercial carriers to deliver their own 'service' functionality to the First Responders and Public Safety users."

Politico said Motorola Solutions declined to comment on its lobbying activities, though the company said it has "worked closely with public safety" for years and noted it is "frequently

asked to provide its real-life insight" regarding communications systems and services for first responders.

Asked about the *Politico* articles, a FirstNet official, without specifying any companies, said some vendors are protecting their corporate interests and defending their bottom lines. FirstNet board member Jeff Johnson, who has led FirstNet's outreach programs, told *Urgent Communications*, "When we say that FirstNet will change everything, we need to be cognizant of the fact that some people don't want everything to change."

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