

Will FirstNet Move Forward With Local Broadband Projects?

Government Technology By Brian Heaton February 12, 2013



Seven regional wireless networks could soon serve as models for a nationwide public safety broadband communications system.

The [First Responder Network Authority](#) (FirstNet) announced on Tuesday, Feb. 12, its intention to make seven regional wireless connectivity projects the first test sites for the National Public Safety Broadband Network.

Under a resolution adopted by the [FirstNet board of directors](#), the authority now has 90 days to enter into separate lease agreements with each project entity to use the 700 MHz spectrum for operation of a wireless public safety network.

Each of the seven regions are 2010 Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant winners. Their funding was partially suspended in 2012 by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) when the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 established FirstNet.

FirstNet is an independent authority operating under the NTIA and is charged with establishing a single, nationwide, interoperable public safety long-term evolution (LTE) mobile broadband network. The Act allotted more than \$7 billion in federal grants to develop the network.

Once the individual agreements between the regional entities and FirstNet are agreed upon and approved by the authority's board of directors, the NTIA will decide whether to lift the partial suspension on each of the individual network projects. If it does, work on the networks can resume.

The public safety broadband network projects are located in the areas of Adams County, Colo.; Charlotte, N.C.; the state of Mississippi; the Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications Authority; the San Francisco Bay Area; northern New Jersey; and Albuquerque and Santa Fe, N.M.

FirstNet board member Susan Swenson delivered a report on the BTOP projects and presented the resolution before the board. She said site visits convinced her and other board members that the projects could provide a substantial benefit to FirstNet as work begins on a national network.

Craig Farrill, another FirstNet board member and the authority's acting general manager, likened the process to stitching pieces of fabric in a quilt. He explained that by having each network go live, FirstNet can gain a lot of data and ultimately develop a migration plan between each of those local projects and to the national core network once it's built.

"I think we see it as an opportunity for FirstNet to put LTEs in these territories in a way for us to test the architectural standards and other things we need to verify over time," said FirstNet Chairman Sam Ginn.

Next Steps

In addition to the BTOP grant awardees announcement, FirstNet adopted a variety of other resolutions relating to the authority's operational structure. The board gave Farrill the ability to hire term and permanent employees for FirstNet, with the exception of officer-level appointees, which still need to be approved by the entire FirstNet board of directors.

Tim Bryan, FirstNet board member and CEO of the National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative, updated the board about his team's efforts to recruit a permanent general manager for FirstNet. He said that after receiving several dozen interested candidates, the pool has been narrowed to four individuals, and after the board meets with them, he expects getting the new general manager on board in the next 30 days.

Jeff Johnson, FirstNet board member and CEO of the Western Fire Chiefs Association, presented an update on stakeholder outreach. He explained that while outreach is typically understood to be reaching out to others, FirstNet is taking the approach of listening to its stakeholders and pouring that feedback back into how the network will be built and perform.

The authority's top priority, Johnson said, is to reach out to the governors and leadership groups of all 56 U.S. states and territories to establish a dialog with them as required by law. FirstNet board members will also engage public safety personnel through trade associations and conferences throughout the U.S.

FirstNet is also in the midst of establishing a database of key national and regional law enforcement, fire and emergency personnel to communicate with and market the National Public Safety Broadband Network to potential users.

The national network will also contain an "app catalog" where responders can download a number of trusted and pre-screened mobile applications to help them do their public safety jobs better. Johnson said a hackathon is being planned for the second quarter of 2013 to inspire innovation in the developer community.

NTIA Associate Administrator [Stephen Fletcher](#), who heads the administration's Office of Public Safety Communications (OPSC), also gave the board an update on the [\\$135 million state and local public safety grant program](#) established by the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act.

The program provides a mechanism whereby state and local entities can prepare for the national public safety broadband network and consult with FirstNet. Fletcher revealed that as of Feb. 6, state, local and tribal entities could begin applying for \$121.5 million in grant money from the program. March 19 is the deadline to submit grant requests.

The grant will be awarded in two phases. The first phase is to establish and identify a governance structure, such as a single officer or entity within a state, tribal or local entity FirstNet can consult with. The second phase and funding will be used to help identify and collect the types of data FirstNet needs to collect from entities to further the establishing of the national network.

Fletcher said he anticipates completing review of the first phase of grant requests and awarding of funds by July 15.

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