

### FirstNet begins new era under Swenson's leadership

Urgent Matters (*blog*) By Donny Jackson

June 5, 2014

WESTMINSTER, COLO.—According to conventional wisdom, a fledgling organization that loses its chairman and top staffer in less than two months will immediately suffer a period of relative inactivity and uncertainty in the wake of such announcements. Many close observers might even hint at an imminent collapse.

Apparently, the folks at [FirstNet](#) didn't get this conventional-wisdom memo—and that's a good thing.

This week, the FirstNet board conducted its first meetings since Bill D'Agostino resigned as general manager in April and Sam Ginn stepped down as chairman. Instead of showing signs of vulnerability without these leaders, FirstNet conveyed a renewed sense of purpose and momentum that was welcomed by even oft-skeptical public-safety officials.

Leading the way is new Chairwoman Sue Swenson, who received plaudits from almost all stakeholder camps as FirstNet embarks on a new era without Ginn, the FirstNet board chairman since its establishment almost two years ago.

Swenson has a reputation of being a detail-oriented, tireless worker who has earned the respect of first-responder representatives, which is no small feat for someone with a commercial-industry background. This sentiment was reinforced with her opening keynote speech for the [PSCR](#) stakeholders meeting, in which she [acknowledged some areas where FirstNet has &ldquo;missed the mark&rdquo; in the past](#) before positively directing the focus that will be needed to make a nationwide broadband network for public safety a reality.

"This is something that makes a difference, and that's frankly what keeps me here," Swenson said. "I will tell you that, last year, I seriously thought about not standing for reappointment. I was so frustrated with a couple of things that occurred, and I'll tell very honestly that I was literally that close to saying, 'I've had enough of this.'

“Even though there may be some perceptions that us industry-wireless folks may not get it, I hope that people start to see the commitment and conviction that we have, that we really are getting it and are part of the public-safety community ... I really am committed to public safety and to this particular effort.”

In her PSCR speech and in statements during the FirstNet board meetings, Swenson expressed her expectations that members of the FirstNet team need to break the stereotypical mold of government workers and more closely follow the work ethic of employees in a commercial startup.

[FirstNet](#) Deputy General Manager TJ Kennedy, who has been acting as FirstNet's general manager since D'Agostino resigned, echoed this sentiment during a FirstNet committee meeting on Monday.

“We're really looking for people to come in with that startup mindset and culture,” Kennedy said. “We often work very long days and weekends, and we often work early morning hours and late at night to really try to drive toward accomplishing the mission and getting key deliverables done that have to be brought together.

“[We want people who] do not sit back and say, ‘We can't do it' but ‘How are we going to make it work?’ To work in that startup environment is very different than some of the standard government positions. So, for somebody transferring over who thinks it's a lot like another government agency, it's probably going to be a shock to their system.”

Swenson also shared her philosophy of [“Execute, Engage, Communicate and Collaborate”](#) as a path to achieving meaningful results. She also conveyed a no-excuses attitude in terms of achieving the mission.

“Have you ever had anybody come into your office and say, ‘Oh my god, this is such a problem’?” Swenson said. “My attitude is that I ask, ‘Did somebody die?’ If the answer is ‘No,’ then my attitude is that we can fix it.

“Let’s not dwell on what happened in the past. It’s an interesting perspective, but it’s frankly not useful for solving the problem. I look at these as opportunities for improvement.”

Given the massive challenge ahead of FirstNet, this philosophy should serve the organization well as it pursues several key milestones, including state consultations and the launch of first-responder [LTE](#) networks. It certainly sounds like Swenson understands the importance of the task at hand.

“I’m here only because this is going to make a difference in not only the lives of public-safety people but the lives of everybody,” she said. “We’re going to save lives as a result of this.”

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