

FirstNet board to conduct special meeting, Swenson to testify before Congress next week

Urgent Communications By Donny Jackson

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[FirstNet](#) board members will consider issuing a second public notice on key policy questions during a special board meeting on Monday, and FirstNet Chairwoman Sue Swenson is slated to testify next Wednesday as part of the Senate Commerce Committee's first oversight hearing about the three-year-old organization.

FirstNet's board will convene via teleconference at 10:00 a.m. Eastern on Monday, March 9, to consider a public notice to gather input on legal interpretations associated with the "planning, deployment, operation, and sustainability of the nationwide public-safety broadband network," according to a statement from FirstNet spokesman Ryan Oremland.

Last fall, FirstNet conducted a similar proceeding that addressed legal interpretations surrounding the notion of what qualifies as a "public-safety entity" that can have priority access on the much-anticipated network, as well as what FirstNet's rural-coverage obligations are. That proceeding attracted 64 responses, including some [noteworthy differences](#) between the [Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials](#) (APCO) and the National Public-Safety Telecommunications Council ([NPSTC](#)).

FirstNet officials have said that they intend to conduct a follow-up proceeding to get further input on at least the "public-safety entity" issue. FirstNet still plans to conduct a follow-up proceeding on this matter, but it will not be done in the public notice that board members will consider on Monday, Oremland said.

"These are new issues separate from the first public notice from last fall," he said.

Two days after the special board meeting, Swenson is scheduled to testify before the Senate Commerce Committee. The hearing on Wednesday, March 11, is entitled "Three Years Later:

Are We Any Closer To A Nationwide Public Safety Wireless Broadband Network?"

FirstNet [was established by Congress in February 2012](#) as part of legislation pushed by Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W. Va.), who was chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee at the time. Rockefeller retired last year. Republicans assumed majority control of the Senate in last November's elections, and Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) is the chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee.

In its description of the March 11 hearing, a release from the Senate Commerce Committee states that "witnesses will discuss progress and challenges in building the network, as well as FirstNet's future as a self-funding entity as required by [law]."

In addition to Swenson, other witnesses scheduled to testify during the hearing include: Bruce Andrews, deputy secretary for the U.S. Department of Commerce; Mark Goldstein, director of the physical-infrastructure team in the Government Accountability Office (GAO); and Todd Zinser, inspector general (IG) for the U.S. Department of Commerce.

In December, Zinser's office [issued a report](#) citing multiple problems with FirstNet contracting practices during its first 14 months of existence, including a board member who exerted "undue influence" on a contractor's hiring practices during this period. The IG investigation was sparked by [allegations made by FirstNet board member Paul Fitzgerald in April 2013](#)

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