

FirstNet's Swenson hopes collaboration can transform LA-RICS LTE 'lemons' into 'lemonade'

Urgent Communications By Donny Jackson

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Officials with [FirstNet](#) and the federal government are committed to working with key local representatives to help the Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications System (LA-RICS) develop a “viable” alternative for its troubled public-safety [LTE](#) system, according to FirstNet Chairwoman Sue Swenson.

Last Friday, the [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) (NTIA) [suspended construction on the LA-RICS LTE network](#), which has unraveled in the wake of decisions by elected officials to prevent deployment of public-safety LTE sites on property owned by Los Angeles County and the [city of Los Angeles](#). NTIA administers the \$154.6 million in federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant that is funding most of the proposed LA-RICS network and is due to expire on Sept. 30.

To get the NTIA suspension lifted, LA-RICS needs to propose an alternative plan to NTIA by next Monday, April 13. However, LA-RICS officials will not have to develop the plan alone, Swenson said.

“It’s all hands on deck,” Swenson said Friday during an interview with [IWCE](#)’s *Urgent Communications*

“We’re not just saying, ‘LA-RICS, you figure it out.’ They’re getting support from Motorola [Solutions, the LA-RICS vendor]. They’re getting support from FirstNet. They’re getting support from NTIA. They’re getting support from the state. Everybody is really pulling together to try to figure this out.

“I think that’s a good thing. Nobody is saying, ‘You’re on your own; figure it out.’”

Although NTIA has suspended any construction on the LTE project by LA-RICS, Swenson noted that LA-RICS can use federal grant monies to fund development of a revamped project.

“[NTIA’s suspension] has stopped construction, but [LA-RICS officials] still have resources to go forward and develop an alternative plan,” Swenson said. “So, we haven’t completely cut them off

“I think it’s important to know that NTIA is being very reasonable in its management of the grant, because obviously they [LA-RICS personnel] need resources to come up with an alternative plan. We can’t just cut them completely off.”

Last year, [LA-RICS signed a contract with Motorola Solutions to build a public-safety LTE network](#) that was designed to have 232 cell sites, all of which would be located on government-owned property that would not be subject to time-consuming state environmental procedures. However, objections from public-safety unions and local residents over the deployment of the cell sites have caused several key jurisdictions to halt construction on the project, which now has access to only “about 50” of the original sites, according to LA-RICS Executive Director Patrick Mallon.

Swenson said that officials began looking at potential alternatives to the LA-RICS public-safety LTE plan after the [Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted on March 24 to halt construction](#) on most county sites—almost half of the total sites in the LTE system—until concerns from the unions and residents could be addressed.

“We’ve been looking at different alternatives—maybe a smaller footprint, potentially, but one that’s contiguous and that could provide a broadband experience,” Swenson said. “The good news is that everybody has the same outcome that they’re striving toward.

“It may look different than what we currently have, and there are certain criteria that obviously have to be met, but nobody’s working against each other on this, which is great.”

In separate interviews, both Mallon and Swenson said they were encouraged by the fact that the state of California—led by efforts from Karen Wong, the state’s single point of contact (SPOC) for FirstNet—has expressed interest in making assets available that could help LA-RICS fill coverage gaps or enhance capability on the public-safety broadband network.

“I think there are going to be some resources coming from the state to help out,” Swenson said. “And, if you think about it, that’s not a bad thing—to get the state and the big cities working together. I’m hoping that out of lemons comes lemonade.

“So, there could be some good outcomes coming out of this, if we manage through it right in the next week or so.”

Also encouraging is the fact that local Los Angeles-area officials have told federal representatives that they philosophically want the public-safety [LTE](#) system to be deployed, Swenson said.

“Nobody there is saying, ‘We don’t want this,’ because that makes no sense,” Swenson said. “I think everybody is on the same page. It’s just a matter of figuring it out now.

“So, resources are deployed, everybody’s ready, conversations have already begun. Let’s just keep our fingers crossed for the next week and hope that we get a viable plan that everybody can go forward with.”

When asked whether an alternative LA-RICS public-safety LTE system might include a greater concentration of cell sites to support greater data capacity, Swenson indicated that such an approach is one of several possibilities that may be considered. But no new plan will be approved unless it is done in manner that helps [FirstNet](#) gain key knowledge that can be used to deploy its nationwide first-responder network, she said.

“We’ll want to make sure that whatever design the team comes up with is not just a patchwork

quilt and that we're getting a broadband experience, because that's what we want to learn," Swenson said. "There's going to be criteria that people are going to be looking for.

"FirstNet and [NTIA](#) are going to be working with LA-RICS to review this. We're not going to let something go through just to do a project. That's a waste of taxpayer money, so we're not going to do that."

If those goals are met, Swenson said LA-RICS public-safety LTE initiative can be successful—even if the final LTE system is a marked change to the original proposal.

"I think what people need to be open to is that, if we come out with a different plan, it's still something that's useful," Swenson said. "Just because it doesn't look like the previous one, there are still very significant key learnings that we can gather. And that's really what the purpose of these BTOP project are—it's an investment to learn things, so that we're learning something in one city that we don't now have to learn in 110 or 300 cities, which would be problematic.

"So, I think that everyone has to be open to the fact that, even if it looks different, that doesn't mean that it's wrong. It's just to take a different shape, and we'll get benefit out of it."

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