

Swenson says LA-RICS providing FirstNet with valuable lessons about outreach, infrastructure sharing

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As the saga surrounding the Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications System (LA-RICS) public-safety [LTE](#) deployment unfolds, [FirstNet](#) officials are learning a great deal about the importance of outreach and limitations associated with infrastructure sharing, according to FirstNet Chairwoman Sue Swenson.

A key component of the LA-RICS deployment plan has been to leverage existing government-owned property—for example, city and county fire stations—to locate LTE cell sites. With this approach, LA-RICS was allowed to skip some of the time-consuming state environmental regulation procedures, which was the only way to complete the system by the Sept. 30 deadline attached to the \$154.6 million in federal grants being used to pay for most of the project.

But deploying the sites has not proceeded as planned. Objections raised by local residents and public-safety unions resulted in suburban jurisdictions refusing to let LA-RICS build on their property, which was followed by elected officials for Los Angeles County and the city of Los Angeles voting to halt construction in their jurisdictions. Of the original 232 sites planned for the LTE system, “about 50” remain available today, LA-RICS Executive Director Pat Mallon said.

Last week, the [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) (NTIA) suspended construction on the project.

This episode has FirstNet officials rethinking the practicality of utilizing assets owned by local or state governments that can experience significant policy shifts in a relatively short period of time, according to Swenson.

“The rules change, the leadership changes, opinions change,” Swenson said during an interview with [IWCE](#)’s *Urgent Communications*.

Swenson mentioned the difficulties associated with leveraging government assets as a primary source of infrastructure for the proposed public-safety broadband network while testifying before Congress last month. The evolution of the LA-RICS since that time has only reinforced the concern.

“In the legislation [creating FirstNet], it calls for using existing infrastructure to deploy the network,” Swenson said. “That sounds great in concept, but to be able to actually negotiate all of the different agreements—and every state has different rules about their assets—would take months and years. We’d be dead before the network was deployed.

“That was a huge lesson learned.”

However, Swenson quickly noted that she believes government-owned assets still can play a valuable role to help FirstNet deploy the network in areas where none of the selected partners have existing infrastructure that would support coverage.

“That doesn’t mean we won’t do it [utilize government-owned assets],” Swenson said. “But what will happen is that, once the awards—or award, depending on how many partners we have—are given, then we will look at the existing infrastructure with the partners to say, ‘What does the existing footprint look like, and what can we augment?’

“Then, it [utilizing government-owned assets] becomes an augmentation strategy, not a primary strategy, as I look at it.”

Another “lesson learned” from the LA-RICS situation is the importance of providing outreach about public-safety broadband plans—outreach that needs to include public-safety end users and the community, Swenson said. A repeated concern voiced about LA-RICS is that public-safety users and local residents were not aware of the plan to construct a first-responder [LTE](#) network until towers began being erected.

“This is what outreach is all about, Swenson said. “You can’t just talk to one level of an organization. That’s why we’ve been so adamant about the multiple ways we’re doing outreach. I think this just puts a fine point on how important that is.

“I think it just emphasizes the complexity of our outreach and the breadth of our constituency. You can’t make some assumptions that, just because a management level of an organization is in agreement, that all of the people [in the organization agree]. The unions represent the guys on the street, and you’ve got to pay attention to that.”

One unexpected benefit associated with the LA-RICS challenges is that officials for [FirstNet](#) , [NTIA](#) and the U.S. Department of Commerce have gained experience working together when things do not proceed as planned—something that inevitably occurs with any large project, Swenson said. The collaboration between these officials—and coordination with state and local officials associated with LA-RICS—has been “really good” recently, she said.

“I think it’s just a matter of learning how to [work together],” Swenson said. “I don’t think it’s a matter that they didn’t want to [before]; I think it’s a matter of determining, ‘How do we most effectively work together?’ People know each other now, and when things like this happen, we set up a process where we’re all engaged at the same time.

“Like with any new team, you’ve got to figure out how to work together. We’re going to continue to have challenges, and—if we all work together with the same vision—then we have a chance of being successful.”

Mallon is scheduled to present an alternative plan to the LA-RICS tomorrow. If the plan is approved, it will be submitted to NTIA, which must approve it—with FirstNet—before the suspension on LTE construction can be lifted.

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