

Rural carriers still trying to assess FirstNet opportunity

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FT. LAUDERDALE, FLA.—Less than a week after the [FirstNet](#) board approved a [nationwide procurement strategy](#) to build its public-safety broadband network, rural carriers remain hopeful that FirstNet's stated interest in their infrastructure assets will mean they have a chance to partner in the massive project, panelists said yesterday.

During a luncheon session entitled "What can the [FCC](#) do to promote competition?" at the Competitive Carriers Association (CCA), speakers representing the interests of carriers other than AT&T and Verizon discussed the implication of last week's FirstNet decision.

"There's some frustration amongst CCA members with the announcement last week to go with a nationwide procurement strategy, but I think it's helpful that FirstNet clarified that—in evaluating offerers' responses to the RFP—one of the categories is how they're going to partner with rural carriers and how they're going to build out rural service," Tim Donovan, CCA's vice president of legislative affairs, said.

"So I do think there is still a very important role for CCA members—with existing infrastructure, relationships and right of way in these rural areas—to be part of the FirstNet process. Without that participation and partnership, it's not very likely that we'll have an operational FirstNet network in some of these very rural areas any time soon."

Donovan encouraged rural carriers to pursue partnerships with potential prime bidder groups that are seeking to build out the nationwide FirstNet system for first responders.

"By not being the prime respondent to the RFP, there's no limitation to how many people can partner with a rural carrier," Donovan said. "So, if you are a serving a rural area, you have an opportunity to partner with every single respondent to the RFP and say, 'I have great service in this rural town. I'm happy to work with FirstNet, I want to be part of your plan moving, and I want to move forward.'"

Eric Woody, chief technical and operations officer for Union Wireless—a wireless carrier based in Wyoming—said his company definitely is interested in the FirstNet opportunity, especially because he is hopeful that a FirstNet partnership could pave the way to build/access more sites on federally owned land in its territory. However, Union Wireless continues to have questions about the economics of the endeavor, he said.

“Of course, we’re going to look at it and see what opportunity it brings us,” Woody said. “In the vast majority of my network, I have more opportunity to provide better service to the likes of FirstNet, and maybe they can help me get some permits that I can’t get any other way maybe, with the issues there

“So, it might help out for us to partner there. On the other hand, I’m not quite sure there’s a business case to really support it yet. There’s just really too many unknowns for me right now to go one way or the other. But I’m hopeful that it works, because we need to find a better way to get first responders the service they need.”

[FirstNet](#) officials continue to state that the organization plans to release its final request for proposal (RFP) by the end of the year, which means that potential bidders will be crafting their responses at the same time that many wireless carriers—expected to be key components of the bidding teams—will be participating in the [FCC](#)’s incentive auction for 600 MHz spectrum.

During the panel discussion, Woody said he does not believe the FirstNet opportunity will impact his company’s strategy in the incentive auction.

“I look at that [FirstNet] as hopefully icing on the cake, more than anything,” Woody said. “I don’t think it’s really going to change what markets we want to pursue aggressively or not so aggressively, because we’re really looking first at what we need for ourselves, and that’s going to be dependent on where we’re going to need that low-band spectrum.”

Michael Calabrese, director of the New America Foundation’s wireless future program, said he believes a FirstNet selection of AT&T or Verizon as its sole carrier partner should face antitrust

scrutiny.

“We’ve said for years that the worst possible outcome of the FirstNet process would be if FirstNet partners with a single national carrier—particularly one of the two dominant carriers—because that, in effect, gives them another 20 MHz of low-band spectrum,” Calabrese said. “The antitrust division of the Justice Department said that access to low-band spectrum is really the competitive differential between three and four carriers in markets, and this is just kind of a backdoor way [to access more low-band spectrum].”

“And they’ve got to remember that FirstNet isn’t just some company out there; FirstNet is a federal enterprise, and it’s public money going into this. Because it’s taxpayer money ... there should be considerations of making sure that access to that spectrum is done in a way that promotes competition at the same time that it builds the network that public safety needs.”

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