

State consultations will set the tone for FirstNet

Urgent Communications By Donny Jackson May 1, 2014

[FirstNet](#) yesterday [released the consultation package](#) that outlines what each state and territory needs to accomplish before formal talks with FirstNet can begin regarding the deployment of a public-safety broadband network within each jurisdiction and how it will fit into the much-anticipated nationwide system for first responders.

With the consultation process outlined, FirstNet soon will face its first major litmus test in dealing with the states, which promise to be critical partners in the endeavor to make a nationwide public-safety broadband system a reality.

According to the consultation package, FirstNet officials hope to have their first in-person consultation session with representatives of each state and territory between July 1 and Nov. 30. Some states must do a lot of work before they will be ready to start the consultation process. For some states—particularly those that applied for Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grants to build public-safety [LTE](#) systems—completing the six-point “readiness checklist” should not be difficult, because much of the work has been done.

These meetings will be private, but the entire industry will be looking and listening intently for indications about FirstNet’s approach during these initial talks. From the moment FirstNet was established, some feared that the new federal entity might seek to dictate to the states what kind of network they would receive, whether it met the state’s needs or not.

However, [public statements during the past year](#) and the fact that this state-consultation process exists indicate that this fear is misplaced, that FirstNet officials believe that having strong relationships with the states and territories is vital.

While FirstNet officials have said the right things publicly, that only goes so far. It is critical that this message is reinforced during the consultation process. The last thing that’s needed right now are state representatives saying, “Well, FirstNet says they want to work with the states, but it really just dictates everything and won’t listen to what we have to say when we get in these meetings.”

Collaboration between FirstNet and the states is the only way this is going to get done, and both sides have plenty of incentive to work together. The states don't have access to the spectrum that is licensed to FirstNet. Meanwhile, FirstNet needs to have state representatives vocally supporting the system plan to have any hope of getting local entities to subscribe to the broadband service—a necessary component to any long-term sustainability hopes. And neither FirstNet nor the states have a lot of extra money, so they need to combine their limited resources.

Does this mean that the states and [FirstNet](#) will agree on everything? Of course not. States will push for the coverage, capacity and capabilities they believe is needed to address the unique needs of their local first responders, while FirstNet is mandated to ensure that the system maintains [interoperability](#) nationwide. It's only logical to expect that there will be instances when those positions will be in conflict and disagreements will happen—that's typical in any negotiation, which is what this is.

When such disagreements occur, the key to reaching a resolution often is the general tenor of the discussions to that point. If both sides have taken a collaborative approach from the outset, they tend to work together to devise solutions to even the biggest problems. If talks have been combative from the beginning, even the smallest disagreement can mushroom into an issue that prevents a deal from getting done.

For FirstNet and the states, it is imperative that all parties assume a collaborative stance to the consultation process. Even by working earnestly together, there are issues (funding being a major one) that promise to make this effort challenging, to say the least. If either side tries to dictate terms to the other, it will be a recipe for failure. And, given that the safety of first responders and the citizens they serve is at stake, that cannot be an option.

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