

FirstNet board OKs public notice, comprehensive RFI in key steps toward procurement

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[FirstNet](#) board members today voted to initiate public-notice and request-for-information (RFI) proceedings that are designed to prepare for its much-anticipated request-for-proposal (RFP) procurement efforts next year.

With today's action, FirstNet will release a comprehensive RFI—including a draft statement of objectives (SOO)—to gather input on technical matters regarding items such as network design, as well as a notice-and-comment document that is designed to get public perspectives on a wide range of FirstNet-related legal issues. Copies of both documents will be posted online at www.firstnet.gov

Input from both the comprehensive RFI and the public-notice proceedings will be used by FirstNet officials to develop the draft RFP that is scheduled to be delivered during the first quarter of 2015, which will be the precursor to a final RFP.

“We are going to be making some critical decisions based on this information, some of which are going to be popular and some of which may not be quite so popular, because they are decisions in trying to get to the specifics of what FirstNet will really look like,” FirstNet Chairwoman Sue Swenson said during the board meeting, which was webcast. “It is going to start to get down to some of the real critical things we’ve all been talking about. But we have to make the decisions, or we’re not going to be able to move forward.”

With today's actions, Swenson said FirstNet is “on track” with its roadmap that was approved in March, noting that embarking on the procurement process represents “a huge milestone” for the organization.

FirstNet board member Jeff Johnson echoed this sentiment.

“It feels like this soapbox car is out of the blocks and headed down the slope,” Johnson said during Monday’s meeting of the FirstNet outreach committee, which was webcast. “And, from here on, we’re going to do nothing more than gain speed.”

Anyone can submit responses to the public-notice or RFI document within 30 days of its publication in the Federal Register, but FirstNet officials anticipate that most responses to the RFI—entitled as the “Comprehensive Network Solution Request for Information and Statement of Objectives”—will come from the vendor community. In an effort to solicit responses to the RFI that include the most up-to-date technical and business information, RFI responses will be kept confidential, according to FirstNet Acting General Manager TJ Kennedy.

“Because this is nearing the end of that market-research process, we want really want to get down to specifics,” Kennedy said during the meeting. “We need to make some key technology decisions. We need to make some key business decisions.

“This input will really help drive that. Those decisions are not made. This is a real request for input. But we want that input to not be holding back on key information that companies could provide now to make sure we go forward with the best solutions.”

FirstNet will be conduct an “Industry Day” to gain further input from vendors sometime after receiving the RFI responses and before the draft RFP is released, Kennedy said during a press briefing after the FirstNet board meeting. FirstNet has not committed to a timetable for issuing the final RFP, he said.

Responses to the public-notice item--entitled “Public Notice on Statutory Interpretations”—will be available for review online. Within the notice, FirstNet staff provides its interpretations of the “outer boundaries” of provisions on various matters in the law passed by Congress in February 2012 that created FirstNet, according to Stuart Kupinsky, FirstNet’s chief counsel.

Some of the key issues addressed in the public notice include the definition of a “public-safety entity” that is eligible to use the system and the definition of “rural” that should be used when determining FirstNet’s buildout plans, Kupinsky said.

While the public notice includes staff interpretations of legal issues, they are not policy statements for [FirstNet](#) or its board members, Swenson said.

“The act describes some things that we think need interpretation,” Swenson said. “We are offering up a view of that. It is clearly an opportunity, frankly, for all of you in the audience and the viewing audience on the webcast to actually provide input to it.

“So, this is very open transparent process, and I just want to make sure everybody understands that these are not decisions; these are frameworks of things to think about and react to.”

Since its establishment two years ago, FirstNet has been in a market-research phase to determine what is technologically possible and what is practical from various perspectives, including funding and operations. By issuing a comprehensive RFI, FirstNet officials can continue to gather input from—and interact with—vendors in an open manner before being constrained by fairness rules and policies associated with an RFP.

“After this market-research phase ends, it will not be the time to have additional market research, where we can have open dialog with industry,” Kennedy said. “What’s so important about an RFI like this is that we can take that open dialog today, and we can take those inputs. But, when we get into the RFP, we are actually locked down during that RFP process, and ... there are specific points where we will have to turn off that communication to keep the integrity of the RFP process.”

Given these realities, FirstNet is entering a period in which board members will have to be more careful in their interactions with vendor representatives to comply with legal guidelines and policies, Swenson said Monday during the FirstNet governance committee meeting, which was webcast.

“While our ability to interact was broader in the past, I think there’s going to be a change in that,” Swenson said. “I think it’s really important to communicate to the many people who want to interact with us that it’s likely that we’re going to have to say, ‘No.’ I don’t people to perceive it as being uninterested, but we’re embarking on a new era.

"I think it signals good news, because we actually moving ahead and getting to a point where we have to have this conversation [about restricted interaction with vendor representatives], but I think it's going to feel unnatural to people who may not be as familiar with it. I just want to make sure that everyone's aware that we haven't all of a sudden become unresponsive."

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