FirstNet Board Advances Vision for a Sustainable Public Safety National Network
A Connected Nation Policy Brief
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On December 11, 2012, the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) held its second Board of Directors meeting. FirstNet is the new federal entity that will hold the FCC license for the "D block" of upper 700 MHz spectrum, and is responsible for building a national Public Safety Broadband Network (PSBN) over this band. FirstNet was created by the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012, enacted in February 2012.

In this meeting, the Board continued to build the legal structures needed to conduct its business and continued advancing its vision for a sustainable public safety network. The Board also reflected upon the significant challenges facing the project and the struggle to find balance between a broad coordinated dialogue with multiple stakeholders versus the need for swift action to advance the project.

The PSBN under development will ultimately provide terrestrial LTE or satellite broadband service that will cover every square foot of the nation's geography, while serving first responders across the nation with sufficient quality of service to ensure functionality during emergency situations. On the financial front, the business plan that sustains the PSBN will need to reflect the competitive forces faced. The PSBN will compete with commercial LTE networks for the provision of service to first responders, who will only become its customers if FirstNet offers competitive value. Other revenue sources from third party users contemplated in the legislation are as yet undefined and further planning is needed to build it into the PSBN business plan. Further, the network needs to be built to ensure device and application flexibility that will meet the operational and security needs of first responders, all at prices that are comparable to commercially available solutions. All of this implies significant engineering, business, and planning challenges for the FirstNet Board and its multiple stakeholders. Chairman Sam Ginn voiced a commitment to resolving the many dimensions of this challenge with the objective to have the PSBN operational – at least in part — in a shorter timeframe than some critics are betting on.

Other key items of the meeting include:

Housekeeping Resolutions Passed

The Board approved a series of resolutions to enable its operations, including resolutions that enable FirstNet to accept gifts and voluntary services; define the Public Safety Advisory Committee's roles and responsibilities; outline the financial responsibilities of the Board; enable the Board to move ahead with plans to develop a business plan; and approve interim active officers responsible for advancing the work of the Board while permanent positions are filled.

Permanent and Interim Management Roles

The Board is actively recruiting a General Manager for FirstNet (see FirstNet General Manager Recruitment Prospectus). The Board has received 27 applications for the position and expects to make a decision in short order. In the interim, and in order to ensure continued movement of the project, the Board nominated Board Members Craig Farrill as Interim General Manager, and former firefighter Jeffrey Johnson as interim Manager of Outreach.

Comprehensive Business Plan for the PSBN Expected in April 2013

A key order of business for the Board at this time is the preparation of a comprehensive business plan that will address the unique challenges of the project, both from a network design and a business perspective. Many commenters to the first NOI of FirstNet noted the need for such a plan. Board Member Farrill reported that they are actively working on it and expect the Plan to be ready by April 2013.

The Board passed a resolution approving an initial budget of $10 million to finance the preparation of this comprehensive business plan. There appeared to be some early dissent on this matter as reflected in the lengthy discussion regarding the need for this early operational budget influx. Proponents of this resolution pointed out that while $10 million is a significant sum for planning of traditional LMR networks, it is not unreasonable to finance the professional services needed to development a comprehensive business plan for the PSBN network.

Possible Decision on Suspended BTOP Projects in 1Q2013

The Board provided an overview of ongoing discussions with stalled public safety LTE platform Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) projects originally funded by NTIA through ARRA. During implementation of the stimulus bill, back in 2009, these projects were approved and funded to create regional LTE platforms that would support first responders. When the Middle Class Tax Relief Act was passed, these projects were suspended pending a decision by FirstNet. At issue is the need to ensure that these regional networks will be compatible with PSBN standards for interoperability under development by FirstNet.

FirstNet is conducting outreach efforts to better understand each project and make a determination regarding their future status. To date the Board has visited three of these projects (in Charlotte, NC, the state of Mississippi, and Adams County, CO). Each of these projects has partnered with different vendors, offering disparate visions for the network integration. The NC project chose to partner with Alcatel-Lucent, the state of Mississippi is working with Motorola, and the Adams County project is working with Raytheon and General Dynamics.

Key issues addressed during the overview include:

- Cell towers serving the PSBN will need to meet robustness standards affording increased reliability through natural disasters that are typically not met by commercial towers. Upgrading towers to meet such standards will result in significant additional costs and pose an additional planning burden for FirstNet. Among other things, the government will not pay for upgrades to sites absent a security interest. This issue needs to be fully addressed in the PSBN business plan under development.
- Devices and SIM Cards: the regional projects reported unexpected high costs for devices and SIM cards. The NC project, for example, is paying $30 per SIM card, compared to approximately $1 in the commercial market. These are areas where FirstNet can help drive down costs through development of standards and economies of scale.
- FirstNet needs to take into consideration the timing of state legislative sessions as it makes its determination regarding the fate of these projects. In some cases, if the projects are to move forward, legislators need to appropriate funds for the project. In order for that to happen during the next legislative session, a timely decision by FirstNet is essential.

The Board plans to continue its outreach efforts to other BTOP projects. While there was no commitment on this matter, the Board signaled a desire to make quick decisions on the fate of these projects, which could come in early 2013. Board members noted that these regional projects could provide a laboratory for different models.

Further Conceptual Discussion of PSBN Structure

During the initial FirstNet Board meeting back in September, Board Member Farrill gave a presentation of a vision for flexible, modular, and adaptable network infrastructure. During this second meeting consultant Peter Suh offered a [presentation](#) of the developing vision for an application ecosystem for FirstNet that will advance the goals of the Board: a system that will serve the needs of first responders, including prioritization, control, and authentication of users, while encouraging innovation in application development and the ability to monetize applications.

FirstNet is creating a library of existing applications serving the first responder community and urges all to contribute to it. This will serve as the foundation for the applications ecosystem under design.

Outreach: 6 Regional Meetings in 1Q2013 in Partnership with NGA

The Board is prioritizing at this time outreach to key stakeholders including first responders as well as state, local, and tribal entities to ensure their input is incorporated into these early stages of the FirstNet planning. Board Member Jeff Johnson provided an overview of the structure of the newly formed Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC). PSAC is comprised of 41 members brought over from SAFECOM and will serve under the FirstNet Board as a key conduit for outreach efforts. To advance these efforts, PSAC is partnering with the National Governors Association to organize a series of six state/regional seminars in the first quarter of 2013. In parallel, the Board plans to release early next year a series of new NOIs seeking comment on multiple technical aspects of the project.

The next FirstNet Board meeting is scheduled for February 12, 2013, in Boulder, CO. In the interim, Connected Nation will continue monitoring FirstNet developments.

For more information about FirstNet, please contact Connected Nation at policy@connectednation.org.