

By Hunter Newby



## FirstNet – Where Are We Now?

It has been a while since the last update on FirstNet, the independent authority within the NTIA, to provide emergency responders with the first high-speed, nationwide network dedicated to public safety. So, what has happened in the past six months?

On April 23, FirstNet announced at its board meeting that it has hired as its general manager Bill D'Agostino, who most recently served as executive director, network for Verizon Wireless in Southern California from 2008-12. Prior to that, he held executive positions at Sprint PCS, Airtouch Communications and Pacific Bell.

Obviously the FirstNet board had already known that D'Agostino got the position, as they were prepared with the announcement that went out that day. It is not unusual for members of a board to have information about what will be disclosed during a board meeting before it occurs of course. That is what an agenda is for, but then there are times when someone says something that is not a part of the agenda.

In that same meeting board member Sheriff Paul Fitzgerald dropped a bombshell that left a trail of fallout all the way from the board meeting minutes to The New York Times. He disclosed that he believed FirstNet was being secretly run by commercial interests and even moved to have a formal review of the matter conducted.

"Sheriff Fitzgerald said that the planning effort had already been tainted by secret meetings of small groups of directors, the withholding of financial information from some board members, conflicts of interest in the hiring of consultants and the exclusion of police and fire officials from the planning process," according to The New York Times.

What was interesting was that FirstNet Chairman Ginn warned Sheriff Fitzgerald that he believed the motion would fail if it was brought to a vote and instead advised that another board member make a motion for the matter to be tabled for further discussion. Why was Chairman Ginn so confident it would fail? The first to comment on the allegations and provide that motion was fellow board member Mayor Wellington Webb.

Insomuch as he expressed surprise at Sheriff Fitzgerald's comments, it is equally surprising that Mayor Webb's comments at the very same board meeting, during which he compared the effort to the Manhattan Project "for the military", did not make it into The New York Times article.

FirstNet is viewed as equivalent to the Manhattan Project and is for the military? There are probably a few people in the United States that are a little taken back by that notion. In light of the recent news regarding the NSA surveillance program with Verizon, the role that FirstNet plays and how it is all coming to be is quite relevant. Nevertheless, Sheriff Fitzgerald assured everyone that he would not shirk his duty.

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Also on April 23 FirstNet unveiled its new logo, which includes four images representing police, fire, medical emergency and wireless. I noticed the similarity between the image that is meant to represent police and the Story County, Iowa Sheriff's Star. Maybe that image was added in along with the others to assure the public and certain members of the board that FirstNet is in fact for public safety, on a non-exclusive basis of course. If Sheriff Fitzgerald's suspicions are correct then perhaps the "commercial interests" are represented by the wireless signal image.

Aside from these developments, on May 6 FirstNet announced that it would begin consulting with states, tribes, territories and localities. These entities are critical to FirstNet as they possess control of the right of way in each of their respective geographic areas, which FirstNet needs access to in order to be successful.

So, upon further review, the last six months has brought a few twists and bumps in the road. With a project like this it is to be expected. It is difficult to keep a lid on something so large that is government funded and requires disclosure. The FirstNet board has done a masterful job of navigating around these issues thus far and remains on track to go from zero to building the largest wireless network infrastructure and operating business in the history of the country. Stay tuned. **IT**

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