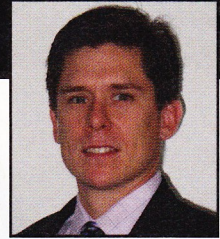


By Hunter Newby



FirstNet, Step 1

Nothing could be more important for the country than a nationwide public safety network. That is other than getting it built and correctly, on time and on budget. Let us not forget about those bothersome details. So, what is the plan for that \$7 billion and the 700MHz D block allocations that the NTIA's FirstNet has been granted, and why is it that so many people in the telecom industry do not know anything about it?

Getting anything accomplished, particularly along the lines of something the size of FirstNet, requires a massive coordination of efforts and awareness, but that is exactly what seems to be the issue at the moment. As significant as FirstNet is to the United States, and considering the dire urgency of its creation, there does not seem to be any alignment of the goals and objectives along with the messaging for the masses. To be clear, it is not very clear.

Maybe it is just that I do not frequent the public safety network conferences, but it does seem odd that with so much necessity to rely on commercial networks to achieve the full nationwide FirstNet network build there is not an increased level of exposure to the broader industry that I am a part of. It is peculiar to me that such a large public works infrastructure project that would certainly create numerous, coveted jobs does not have any structured public information campaign. Step 1 for the nationwide, FirstNet communications network plan should probably be a nationwide corporate communications plan.

Over the past three months, after having presented at numerous telecom industry conferences in front of hundreds of people and having had conversations with several key people in executive management as well as investment banking positions where I have raised the topic of FirstNet, I have only come across two people who knew anything about it and, surprise, they were both lawyers based in Washington, D.C. A \$7 billion federally funded start-up communications business should surely be getting more attention than it has. The lack of general awareness coupled with the size and scope of the plan has come as somewhat of a shock to all of the people that I have spoken with about this.

The reactions range from curiosity to outright disbelief and even in one situation a senior level telecom executive got

quite perturbed about it and indicated that it would be best for the federal government to stay out of his business. One thing was common across all, even the two lawyers; they believe there is a better than good chance that FirstNet will never happen. The two primary reasons cited were that if there is a change in the White House come November, there might not be any political will to support FirstNet going forward, and that even if it did continue it would fail because in the end it is the federal government and it cannot run anything successfully anyway.

Is it cynicism, reality, or a combination of both? One thing is certain – the U.S. lacks a sound, cohesive, nationwide broadband (fiber and wireless) infrastructure plan. Hopefully the newly elected 15-member board of FirstNet can create a real network plan and actually execute on it. If they cannot, or do not, then who will? **IT**

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