

What Are the Feds Up To Now?

The Executive Branch of the Federal Government, or to be more precise, the White House CTO's office, is setting up a September 1, 2010 meeting. "The intent of the meeting is to gather information on key issues/barriers from broadband vendors and wireless carriers regarding entry to Public Safety Broadband market."

I am told that attendees will include the White House CTO, the Department of Commerce, Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and a "senior Executive" (VP or Senior Director level) attendee from each of the network operators and broadband vendors. This list of attendees seems strange to me. If the Executive Branch is trying to help the networks and vendors with the "issues and barriers" regarding entry into the Public Safety Broadband market, shouldn't they have invited some Public Safety people? These people could talk about Public Safety needs and requirements and promote a dialogue about how commercial entities can work together and with them on achieving a fully interoperable, nationwide Public Safety Broadband network.

I recently heard rumors that the meeting has been expanded to include Public Safety, but so far they are only rumors and I have not heard who the Public Safety representatives will be—if, indeed, they have been invited. When I muse about this meeting and its stated purpose, the first thing that comes to mind is that for some reason, the Executive Branch is trying to convince those within the commercial wireless community supporting efforts to have the D Block reallocated to Public Safety to cease in their efforts so the D Block can be auctioned instead. If auctioned, commercial operators and vendors will be able to provide additional equipment and services to Public Safety.

I have many more questions about this meeting. The attendees are supposed to be senior-level executives, one from each company. While these people are an important part of the management of their own networks and companies, most of them are not well versed in the two most important issues that face the Public Safety community: 1) What are Public Safety's requirements for day-to-day and emergency operations of broadband systems, and 2) How, exactly, will the new commercial LTE networks deliver some or all of these requirements?

This, of course, brings up even more questions. How many of those attending are familiar with the Incident Command structure and how it is employed during routine and more serious incidents? How many attendees have actually ridden along in a police car on a Friday or Saturday night? How many have been inside a base camp during a wild land fire (let alone out on the fire lines)? How many have been directly involved during a hostage situation or a multi-vehicle wreck on the highway?

In other words, how many of those attending have any firsthand knowledge of the requirements of the Public Safety community? We all know the answer to this. It is not what they do, and Public Safety will only provide a small portion of their company's revenue. Senior-level executives are charged with helping manage their company and this includes making sure stockholders are looked after, the bulk of their customers are satisfied with their products and services, and helping guide the company to greater profitability in the future.

I wonder what the motivation is for this meeting and who really called it. Why is the Executive Branch CTO involved, and what is the agenda? I, for one, don't see any reason that the government should care about market-driven economics (which have been driving the wireless industry for many years), unless it has an ulterior motive. Or because those attending the meeting are opposed to the D Block reallocation to Public Safety and have put pressure on the Executive Branch to try to stem the tide of the backing Public Safety has gained with members of Congress.

One of the attending companies has given me two different answers to my questions about building product for Public Safety. The first was, "We are not interested because there is not enough volume."

The second, from a different group within the same company, was, "We can build what you need but we will need \$6-8 million in non-recurring engineering money to do so." I have to wonder which view the executive from this company will be presenting.

A representative of one of the network operators has told me on several occasions that the only reason the company wants the D Block is so it can make sure it has roaming rights on the other 700-MHz LTE networks. He fully acknowledges that the D Block with its 10 MHz of spectrum is not enough to serve its customers, but believes this is the entry point into roaming agreements with the others. This when the FCC has not yet addressed the roaming agreement issue and could, in fact, recommend that roaming agreements be put in place even if a network operator does not have 700-MHz spectrum.

This meeting, if held without Public Safety participation, will not decide anything. It cannot because those in the room, while very qualified at what they do, are not qualified to speak for the Public Safety community and its needs and requirements. If Public Safety is included in this meeting, those planning it will probably invite individuals who are not necessarily the best choice for speaking for the community as a whole and who are not knowledgeable in broadband technologies.

I have seen for myself over the past year or more how much misinformation there is about LTE and its capabilities when it comes to total bandwidth, priority access, multi-casting, and voice services. I have read and responded to a number of FCC white papers that were written by academics with no real-world knowledge of LTE or broadband, and who, therefore, made assumptions that are not valid once you look under the hood of the technology and its capabilities. I have to wonder how a group such as this can have discussions that are relevant to the issues and address the needs of the Public Safety community.

I would like to ask those setting up this meeting to define the agenda and to define what outcome they are trying to achieve. The issue of D Block reallocation is already the subject of much misinformation in many different governmental organizations, and from what I can see, this type of meeting will only add to the problem.

I believe this meeting, called on short notice, is a reaction to pressure from those who have their own agenda or are feeling the pressure from those advocating reallocation of the D Block and are looking for a way to slow down the growing public opinion that Public Safety has been short-changed long enough and it is time to provide a resource it desperately needs.

Andrew M. Seybold

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