

August 10, 2016

Public Safety Leaders Respond to Critical Article about FirstNet in "The Atlantic"

Ralph Haller, Chair

Chief Douglas M. Aiken, Vice Chair

Paul Patrick, Vice Chair

National Public Safety Telecommunications Council

Chief (Ret) Harlin R. McEwen, Chair

FirstNet Public Safety Advisory Committee

The very critical article relative to FirstNet published in the September 2016 issue of The Atlantic is far from reality and has generated a lot of discussion among the public safety community. As most public safety officials know, in addition to being inaccurate, the author failed to capture public safety's longstanding advocacy efforts and hard work toward a dedicated, reliable mission critical wireless broadband network. In fact, there is not one single quote or testimonial from a public safety representative in the story.

Contrary to what is reported by the author, the FirstNet Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN) is not a wasteful initiative.

Given the progress made by FirstNet to date, especially as we near the 15th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, it is unfortunate that we may find ourselves once again defending the need for a nationwide public safety broadband network. As was the case 15 years ago, commercially available networks still do not provide emergency responders with the level of reliability and priority that they need. And despite the author's claim that interoperability has been "solved" - there is still much work to be done on that front, too, as we all know.

The public safety community has been working hard to achieve the NPSBN for many years and it is obvious that the author of the article has little understanding of the important reasons for this initiative.

Although it has been somewhat slow and painful to get to where we are today, the progress that has been made in the past 4 years (*the enabling law was passed by Congress in February 2012*) has been quite amazing. FirstNet, with wide support from the public safety community, has responded to the many challenges it has faced and kept moving forward.

The author says "FirstNet is in such disarray that 15 years after the problem it is supposed to solve was identified (*the September 11, 2011 lack of interoperability*), it is years from completion-and it may never be completed at all."

What a ridiculous and false statement. Congress did not authorize a solution until 2012 and since then tremendous progress has been made. FirstNet published a Request for Proposals (RFP) in January 2016 with a deadline for responses in May. Publicly issued statements by three companies/consortiums indicate they have responded to the RFP. FirstNet is reportedly in the process of reviewing the proposals with a goal to issuing a contract by November 1, 2016.

While one of the factors that led to the passing of the enabling legislation was the tragic events of 9/11, even more importantly public safety identified the need for a

more reliable system to share data such as photos, videos, building plans, and emergency medical information than commercial systems provide.

When events like 9/11 or other manmade events such as a terrorist attack or natural events such as floods, wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, or tornadoes occur, public safety needs a reliable method of quickly sharing data and information. The current commercial networks do not offer public safety personnel priority over other customers. The commercial systems usually become overloaded, unreliable, and in many cases not available when public safety urgently needs them. This leads to the need for dedicated radio spectrum that includes public safety priority and redundant backhaul and services.

The Atlantic article is very misleading and does not accurately reflect the status of FirstNet. We urge members of the public safety community to speak out and emphasize public safety's role in advocating for the NPSBN and the progress realized to date. All major public safety organizations have been unified in their support for the spectrum, the funding, and the governance (FirstNet) to make this happen. And FirstNet is moving quickly to form a partnership that will deploy this network at the best value for public safety and the American public.

Bottom line: FirstNet is on track and the Network is going to happen.