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'One at Bat'

ERIC Could Hinder Buildout of Public Safety Network, McEwen Says

FCC officials faced tough questions about a proposed Emergency Response Interoperability Center (ERIC), at a forum sponsored by the Public Safety Bureau at FCC headquarters Tuesday. Public Safety Spectrum Trust Chairman Harlin McEwen questioned the need for the new center and whether the FCC will inadvertently slow deployment of a national wireless broadband network serving public safety. Last week, APCO and other public safety groups said they were deeply concerned about the FCC's proposal to auction the 700 MHz D-block for commercial use, which like ERIC is expected to be part of the National Broadband Plan (CD Feb 26 p 1).

The ERIC proposal does raise some difficult questions and concerns," McEwen said. "The PSST questions whether ERIC is necessary. Given how long we have waited, we fear any effort that may further aggravate our goal of broadband services to the public safety community. In addition we question whether the proposed ERIC framework [initiates] activities and responsibilities that could inadvertently hinder the development of wireless broadband services."

Many of the issues ERIC and a proposed public safety advisory board are to address "overlap" work already well underway among public safety groups, McEwen said. "Does the ERIC proposal undo years of work and essentially start from scratch?" he asked. The process the bureau proposes could also add layers of "bureaucratic federal requirements," he said. The network must be "streamlined and efficient" and start "as quickly as possible."

Deputy Bureau Chief David Furth said the FCC understands the PSST's concerns. "Harlin raises a number of very good questions that we have been talking to public safety and others about and in fact that's one of the reasons that we're having this forum is to come up with answers to questions that Harlin has asked," Furth said. "We want to avoid duplication."

"We are excited about the possibilities of what this center can do," said Bureau Chief Jamie Barnett, who opened the forum. "Even though there is consensus on the overarching ERIC concept, there are still many details to be worked out. Your input today, and in the future quite frankly, will help us ... identify the issues that need to be resolved, gaps that need to be filled, and obstacles that we need to overcome," he said. "We really get one shot at this, one at a bat, one swing, to make sure that we get it right."

"Some of you in this room have been working on the development of a public safety broadband network for over a decade and it's our responsibility to ensure that we deploy this smartly," said Chris Essid, director of the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications.

ERIC will work collaboratively with an advisory committee the FCC is setting up, and other government agencies, as well as with standard setting bodies, said Jeffrey Goldthorp, chief of the Office of Engineering and

Technology's Communications Systems Analysis Division. "We're not doing this alone. We're doing this in partnership with public safety and our federal partners." ERIC will "have a technological and operational framework to enable interoperability for public safety broadband networks, and second of all, to apply and force those requirements by way of license and lease requirements or whether it be grant conditions," he said.

Some pressing issues must be addressed, including the need for roaming on other public safety networks and how roaming would work, Goldthorp said. Interconnectivity will also be a key issue, he said. "You can't have roaming if networks aren't interconnected." Rules for providing priority access for public safety users will also be a key focus, he said. "We envision a world where public safety will have access not only to its own spectrum in the 700 MHz band but other spectrum in that band." Authentications and encryption rules are also important to making roaming work, he said: "If you go to a new jurisdiction how does the network know you are who you say you are?"

The National Emergency Number Association offered a more positive review of the center. "The establishment of the ERIC further demonstrates the commission's strong commitment to enabling a critically needed nationwide public safety wireless broadband network," said President Craig Whittington. "ERIC would provide essential oversight and technical assistance to make the deployment of a nationwide wireless public safety broadband network a reality and ensure that the needs of public safety are met." -- **Howard Buskirk**