

1st state opts out of broadband public safety network

December 7 2017, by Holly Ramer

New Hampshire on Thursday became the first state to say it will reject FirstNet, the nationwide public safety communications system that's been approved in two-thirds of the rest of the country.

The First Responder Network Authority, or FirstNet, was created in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when some police and fire departments couldn't communicate with each other over incompatible radio systems.

Each state and U.S. territory must decide by Dec. 28 whether to opt in to the broadband network dedicated to public safety being built by AT&T or come up with its own system that would work with FirstNet. Thirty-three states and two territories have opted in so far, including eight that had explored alternative options.

New Hampshire will use another company, Rivada Networks. Republican Gov. Chris Sununu made the announcement at a state police barracks, where he was joined by law enforcement officials including the state attorney general and safety commissioner.

"Rivada has proposed a plan that has the potential to provide immense value to our state, including unparalleled public safety infrastructure investments that will lead to unmatched and near universal coverage for the new public safety network," he said. "If we successfully navigate the opt-out path, New Hampshire will retain a level of control that it would not have enjoyed in an opt-in scenario."

States that use AT&T agree to let it build the network within their states at no cost. Those that opt out get federal grants for construction. Among the states that haven't announced decisions, about a dozen are exploring alternatives to FirstNet, according to the International Wireless Communications Expo.

A committee that studied the issue for two years in New Hampshire voted unanimously in October to recommend opting out, while a group representing businesses in the state urged Sununu to opt in, noting that the state could face hundreds of millions of dollars in penalties if the Rivada system fails.

"This seems unnecessarily risky and could backfire leaving New Hampshire taxpayers on the hook," Jim Roche, president of the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire. "We do not believe there is a justifiable reason for taking on such risk with an unproven company when the other choice, opting into the program, is available."

Rivada had sought the federal contract but was eliminated from consideration over concerns that its plan was too risky. A company spokesman said officials ignored the consortium it put together for its bid, and that Rivada's plan offered better coverage and lower subscription fees for first responders.

"We could have made our bid 'less risky' by charging first responders more, by offering less coverage or by shortchanging the network investment, but those did not seem like good tradeoffs for public safety or the network. Unfortunately, the evaluation board saw it differently," said Brian Carney.

An AT&T official, Chris Sambar, said states that have signed on to FirstNet have made the best decision.

"Today, Gov. Sununu has expressed his decision to go down a path not chosen by any of the 35 states and territories before him. We remain hopeful New Hampshire will continue to assess the substantial risks associated with an opt-out proposal of an unproven vendor," he said.

A spokeswoman for FirstNet said it supports New Hampshire's right to choose and will continue to work with state officials.

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