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700 MHZ DEMONSTRATION NETWORK A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Jan 5, 2010 4:45 PM, By Donny Jackson

There is little doubt that the potential benefits of a nationwide 700 MHz broadband network are enormous — the ability to transmit medical data, to run complex criminal database queries and to download blueprints of a burning building are just a few of the examples noted by public-safety officials.

Of course, there are even more examples of technology's reality not matching its hype, particularly in early deployments, when inevitable bugs and glitches tend to be most prominent. In the commercial world, such disappointment typically leads to buyer's remorse. In a public-safety setting, a communications failure can lead to the gravest of consequences.

With this in mind, the **Public Safety Communications Research (PSCR)** program recently announced plans to create a demonstration 700 MHz broadband network devoted to determining what fourth-generation broadband wireless technology can — and can't — do for public safety, as regulators and Congress decide policy issues surrounding the frequency band.

"That's stuff that has never been deployed before, so we probably need to figure out how it's going to work and if it's going to work as expected," PSCR program manager Dereck Orr said. "And, public safety needs to come in and get their hands on it and maybe run some public-safety-specific scenarios over the demo network ... [to] see how it operates, so they have a well-founded expectation of what they're going to get."

PSCR officials this week are beginning to reach out to potentially interested parties — public-safety officials, commercial service providers and broadband wireless vendors — to determine what aspects should be tested over the demonstration network, which will include a laboratory component and an over-the-air component, Orr said.

Orr added that he believes that priority and pre-emption will be high on the list of aspects to be tested, as will the real-world operations of many public-safety applications. He said that the PSCR wants the demonstration network to be used to test "public-safety-specific issues," and not generic broadband operational items that commercial vendors are testing on their own.

"We want to provide environment for the manufacturers and service providers to work out issues among themselves and with their equipment in a very open, non-competitive environment, but focused specifically on the public-safety requirements," Orr said.

The PSCR is hopeful that the demonstration network can be deployed late this summer or early in the fall — a timeline that largely depends on the availability of gear for new 4G standards such as LTE, Orr said. In addition, while the initial demonstration network will be deployed in a rural area outside of Boulder, Colo., the PSCR also plans to pursue opportunities to establish a similar demonstration network in an urban area, he said.

News of such testing should be welcomed by both the public-safety and commercial communities. For the former, the demonstration network should be a valuable test bed that will help public-safety entities discern where the 4G hype ends and where reality begins, as well as give them a chance to become more comfortable with broadband technology without risking local taxpayers' money.

For commercial manufactures and service providers, having a demonstration network and an open process may allow them to address and integrate public-safety requirements into 4G networks during the early stages of deployments, instead of as an afterthought that may be too expensive for carriers to consider when deployments are nearing completion.

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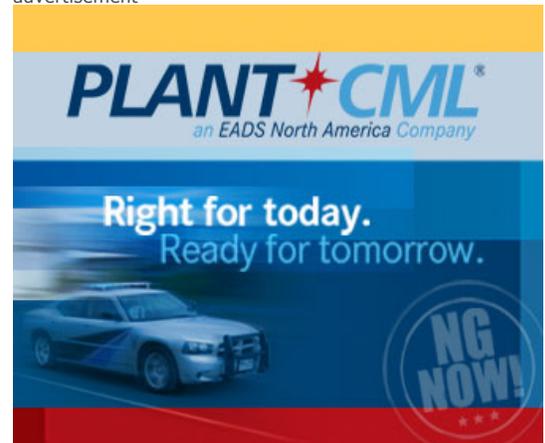
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