

OBAMA MAKES IT OFFICIAL, SIGNS D BLOCK LEGISLATION

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LAS VEGAS — President Barack Obama yesterday signed into law the payroll-tax-cut extension legislation, which reallocates the 700 MHz D Block spectrum to public safety and provides \$7 billion in federal funding to help pay for the buildout of a nationwide LTE network for first responders.

“It’s a big, big deal,” Harlin McEwen, chairman of the **Public Safety Spectrum Trust** (PSST) — the current licensee of the 10 MHz of public safety’s 700 MHz broadband spectrum adjacent to the D Block — said during a special general session yesterday at **IWCE**. “The D Block allocation was the main thrust of our efforts, because we needed more than 10 MHz to take advantage of new technology like LTE to deliver the kind of mobile experience to public safety that we need.”

Public-safety officials had supported legislation that would have dedicated \$11 billion for the buildout of the broadband network, even though most believe that would not be enough to complete a nationwide network. The new law calls for \$7 billion, which is significantly less but still “a lot of money that’s going to get us a long way,” McEwen said.

“Nobody knows what it’s going to cost, but we know it’s going to cost a lot of money, and that the government has to significantly invest in this in order for it to happen,” he said. “We also know that just federal funding alone is not going to do the job. It’s going to take public-private partnerships partnering with commercial carriers and vendors.”

Despite the efforts of some key House Republicans to get public safety to return its 700 MHz narrowband spectrum, the new law keeps the valuable airwaves under the control of first-response entities. Instead, Congress decided that public safety should return its T-band spectrum — located between 470 MHz and 512 MHz in 13 of the largest markets — within 11 years.

“We fought the giveback of spectrum. We fought hard to not give that [700 MHz

narrowband] spectrum back in exchange for the D Block,” McEwen said. “But Congress is not kind to people who want things — they always want to get something in return. At the very last minute, they insisted that the T-band be scheduled for reallocation in 9 or 10 years from now.

“I didn’t give up anything, and neither did any of the public-safety people. This was a pound of flesh [Congress] took from public safety to give us what we got. We didn’t support it, but it is what it is, and we’ve got to work with it now.”

Other aspects of the law call for the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) — a new entity within the **National Telecommunications and Information Administration** (NTIA) — to replace the PSST as the licensee for public safety’s broadband spectrum and is tasked with overseeing the buildout of a single nationwide broadband network for public safety with technical specifications being observed throughout the country to ensure interoperability.

News of the law has generated excitement throughout the public-safety community, particularly among those who have been working for several years to secure the spectrum and funding needed to make a first-responder broadband network a reality.

“Three years ago, folks were telling us we were crazy, this would never happen, it won’t work — all of those things,” Charles Dowd, a deputy chief in the New York City police department, said during an interview. “Now, all of those things are out the window. We’re on the precipice of redefining public-safety communications.

“It’s a great thing — absolutely fantastic. I’m just so excited about this outcome.”

Robert LeGrande, a consultant who oversaw the deployment of the first public-safety broadband project while serving as chief technology officer for Washington, D.C., expressed similar emotions.

“It’s been a long, long, long time — since 2003, when we first started talking about this,” LeGrande said during an interview. “I am so proud our public-safety leadership, administration and Congress for finding a way to get this done — it was not easy. It was a long, arduous process, but I am proud of the effort.”