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New Deadlines Adopted To Spur 800 MHz Rebanding Process

By Robert Gurs
gurs@fhhlaw.com
703-812-0468

The FCC is trying to speed up the painfully slow 800 MHz rebanding process. Rebanding is intended to separate 800 MHz band public safety land mobile channels from those used by Sprint Nextel, due to dangerous interference problems that had developed between the two incompatible network architectures. Set in place in 2005, the massive frequency shift will be paid for by Sprint Nextel through negotiated agreements with public safety licensees, and is scheduled to be completed by June, 2008. That deadline will not be met, however, for a variety of reasons, including protracted negotiations and mediations up to now, vendor backlogs, Canadian and Mexican border issues, and the sheer complexity of the task.

Frustrated by the slow pace, the FCC recently adopted new deadlines intended to get as much completed by June, 2008, as possible. Public safety licensees were given an abbreviated schedule to complete necessary planning work (most of which is to be performed by Motorola, M/A-COM, and various contractors). Fortunately, the Commission seems to be open to extensions where the licensees demonstrate that the necessary tasks cannot be completed despite their best efforts.

The FCC also shrunk the time period for negotiating a Frequency Reconfiguration Agreement with Sprint Nextel (which occurs after the planning process) to just 30 days. Thereafter, there will be a brief 20-day mediation period and, if there is still no agreement, the matter will be submitted to the Commission for resolution. That is a significant compression of the periods that have applied up to now and that often dragged out the negotiation, mediation, and FCC resolution process for many months.

While these new procedures may force parties into faster agreements, they are unlikely to expedite the actual physical rebanding process, which often involves “touching” all mobile and portable radios (sometimes twice) and modifying base stations, all the while

maintaining interoperability with other public safety licensees. That process is likely to stretch well into 2009 for many areas.