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This Week's Stories

T-Mobile, Sprint Close To Agreeing On Deal Terms

September 22, 2017

T-Mobile US Inc is close to agreeing tentative terms on a deal to merge with Sprint Corp, people familiar with the matter said on Friday, a major breakthrough in efforts to merge the third and fourth largest U.S. wireless carriers.

The transaction would significantly consolidate the U.S. telecommunications market and represent the first transformative U.S. merger with significant antitrust risk to be agreed since the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump in January, testing his administration's appetite for such deals.

The development follows more than four months of on-and-off talks this year between the companies, and comes as the telecommunications sector seeks ways to tackle investments in 5G technology that will greatly enhance wireless data transfer speeds.

Japan's SoftBank Group Corp, which controls Sprint, will own 40 to 50 percent of the combined company, while T-Mobile majority owner Deutsche Telekom will own a majority stake, two of the sources said.

Once terms are finalized, due diligence by the two companies will follow and a deal is expected by the end of October, though talks may still fall through, the sources said.

A merger would create a business with more than 130 million subscribers, just behind Verizon Communications Inc and AT&T Inc. Revenues would top \$70 billion and analysts say there would be massive scope to cut costs.

Sprint shares jumped 5 percent in morning trading in New York on Friday to \$8.44, giving the company a market capitalization of close to \$34 billion. T-Mobile shares were up 1 percent to \$64.28, giving that company a market capitalization of around \$53 billion.

The sources asked not to be identified because the negotiations are confidential. Sprint and Deutsche Telekom declined to comment. T-Mobile and SoftBank did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

SoftBank founder Masayoshi Son abandoned an earlier attempt to acquire T-Mobile for Sprint in 2014 amid opposition from anti-trust regulators concerned that consumers could lose out.

That deal would have put SoftBank in control of the merged company, with Deutsche Telekom becoming a minority shareholder.

Since then, T-Mobile has outperformed Sprint under Chief Executive John Legere, who the sources said would lead the combined company.

Earlier this month, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai gave a potential boost to the tie-up when he recommended in a new annual report that for the first time since 2009 the FCC has found there is "effective competition in the marketplace for mobile wireless services."

The FCC is due on Tuesday to vote the annual report on the state of the wireless competition market and Pai may face pushback from Democrats on the commission.

Son made headlines in early December when he appeared in the marble lobby of Trump Tower in New York alongside the then president-elect, dressed in a red vest and red tie nearly identical to that of the tycoon turned commander in chief.

He was among the first in a series of Asian billionaires and leaders to pay tribute to Trump, who won office in November on a platform that focused on national security and protecting U.S. jobs.

Son's pledge to Trump to invest \$50 billion in the United States and create 50,000 jobs was light on details but spoke to the president's election promise to boost economic growth by making deals with individual companies, rather than through complicated trade deals.

Last month, Sprint CEO Marcelo Claure said an announcement on merger talks should come in the "near future."

Earlier this year, Sprint approached cable company Charter Communications Inc about a potential merger, but quickly abandoned that effort.

AT&T is in the process of getting its own transformative deal, its \$85.4 billion acquisition of media conglomerate Time Warner Inc approved by U.S. regulators.

reuters.com

Google Is Paying \$1 Billion For HTC's Smartphone Brains

September 20, 2017

Google is paying handsomely for a massive "acqui-hire."

The company said late Wednesday that it would pay HTC \$1.1 billion for a team of employees of the Taiwanese phone maker, including many who have previously worked on the Google-branded Pixel phones. Separately, Google will get a non-exclusive license to HTC intellectual property.

The deal highlights Google's renewed bet on hardware.

The HTC team transferring to Google, whose size the companies did not disclose, will work under Rick Osterloh, the veteran executive that Google brought in about 18 months ago to lead a new hardware unit responsible for the Pixel phones, the Google Home smart speaker and other devices.

Ironically, Osterloh had been the top executive at Motorola, the smartphone maker which Google bought in 2012 and sold in 2014, after deciding it didn't want to be in the phone-making business after all. Until it did again a year or so later.

"Creating beautiful products that people rely on every single day is a journey, and we are investing for the long run," Osterloh wrote in a blog post announcing the transaction.

"It's still early days for Google's hardware business," Osterloh wrote. "We're focused on building our core capabilities, while creating a portfolio of products that offers people a unique yet delightful experience only made possible by bringing together the best of Google software—like the Google Assistant—with thoughtfully designed hardware."

Osterloh said many of the employees transferring from HTC to Google had worked on the Pixel phones, which Google introduced a year ago. The company is expected to announce the second version of the well-reviewed devices on October 4.

Google and HTC have been longtime partners. The Taiwanese company made the very first Android device, the HTC Dream, in 2008, just months after Apple introduced the iPhone.

HTC is not getting out of the hardware business. The company plans to continue making its own HTC-branded phones, virtual reality headsets and other devices. "This agreement is a brilliant next step in our longstanding partnership, enabling Google to supercharge their hardware business while ensuring continued innovation within our HTC smartphone and VIVE virtual reality businesses," said Cher Wang, chairwoman and CEO of HTC.

forbes.com

Products & Services

iOS 11 Is Now Available To Download

September 19, 2017

"iOS 11 is the coming of age of the iPad. It turns your iPad into a more capable computing device with a brand new user interface."

Apple has just released the final version of iOS 11. This update is packed with new features for the iPad and new core frameworks for the iPhone. The update is currently rolling out and is available both over-the-air in the Settings app, and by plugging your device into iTunes for a wired update.

Many people try to download these major updates at the same time. Apple usually implements a queue system to ensure speedy downloads once you're at the front of the queue.

iOS 11 is compatible with the iPhone 5s and later, the iPad mini 2 and later, the iPad Air and later as well as the most recent iPod touch.

But first, backup your device. Make sure your iCloud backup is up to date by opening the Settings app on your iPhone or iPad and tapping on your account information at the top and then on your device name. Additionally, you can also plug your iOS device to your computer to do a manual backup in iTunes (or do both, really).

Don't forget to encrypt your backup in iTunes. It is much safer if somebody hacks your computer. And encrypted backups include saved passwords and health data. This way, you don't have to reconnect to all your online accounts.

Once this is done, you should go to the Settings app as soon as possible to get in the queue. Navigate to 'Settings,' then 'General' and then 'Software Update.' Then you should see 'Update Requested...' It will then automatically start downloading once the download is available.

iOS 11 is the coming of age of the iPad. It turns your iPad into a more capable computing device with a brand new user interface. While the home screen hasn't changed, there's now a system-wide dock with all your favorite apps. You can drag your finger from the bottom edge of the screen to bring it up at any time.

If you keep dragging, you get an Exposé-like bird's-eye view of your recent apps and workspaces — a workspace can be multiple apps running in split screen. If you want to open two apps side-by-side, you can now just drag and drop an app icon from the dock to the main screen. It's a lot smoother than the previous Split View interface.

Apple also implemented a new spring-loaded, drag-and-drop gesture. Now, you can drag documents, photos, audio files, links and more across multiple apps. It feels like a desktop computer. You can also manage your files in the new Files app, which supports cloud file services, such as Dropbox, Google Drive, Box and OneDrive.

On the iPhone, most of the changes are under the hood. Many developers have been playing around with ARKit, Apple's new augmented reality framework. It is now much easier to create AR-enabled apps, with iOS doing the heavy lifting. You can expect a lot of augmented reality apps and features in the App Store.

The most visible change is the new Control Center with customizable shortcuts (at least some of them). You can add an Apple TV remote shortcut or a battery-saving mode shortcut for instance. The App Store has been completely redesigned as well. And, of course, by keeping your iPhone up-to-date, you get the latest security updates and performance improvements. New emojis are also coming soon — and we both know you don't want to stay behind on the emoji front.

techcrunch.com

YouTube Gaming Adds Twitch-Like Subscriptions Called Sponsorships

September 19, 2017

YouTube Gaming is adding Sponsorships today for eligible content creators after successful tests with the feature to a limited amount of streamers. Fans can pay for these Sponsorships, at \$5 a month, to support their favorite channels. In return, they'll unlock custom badges, emojis, and potentially special chat rooms just for Sponsors.

This is similar to Twitch's Subscriptions. Which also gives viewers the choice to pay a monthly fee to their favorite streamers in return for perks like unique emotes, badges, and exclusive chat rooms.

Twitch is the most popular site for streaming. It has over 100 million users a month. YouTube Gaming is Google's answer to it. Although YouTube Gaming doesn't match Twitch's popularity yet for streamed content, adding more ways for content creators to make money could attract more streamers. For example, YouTube said that the Counter-Strike: Global Offensive professional team Rocket Beans earned 1,500 sponsors in its first day during tests.

Sponsorships are also replacing YouTube's Paid channels. These let creators set up a pay barrier between viewers and their channels starting at \$1 a month, but YouTube said in a press release sent to GamesBeat that less than 1 percent of users today use it.

venturebeat.com

T-Mobile Unlimited Data Throttling Cap To Increase From 32 GB To 50 GB: Is That Good Enough?

September 19, 2017

T-Mobile, which dominated the latest State of Mobile Networks report by OpenSignal, is looking to further widen its lead over rival carriers by increasing the throttling cap for its unlimited data plan.

OpenSignal's report claimed that the decision of Verizon and AT&T to launch their own unlimited data plans in response to the T-Mobile One caused the networks of the two carriers to slow down. Now, the Un-Carrier is making T-Mobile One even better.

“The decision to increase the unlimited data plan's throttling cap comes about a week after the carrier announced that all T-Mobile One unlimited family plan subscribers would be granted free Netflix subscriptions.”

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T-Mobile One Throttling Cap To Increase To 50 GB

The T-Mobile One, as with all the other unlimited data plans in the market, placed a cap on the data that subscribers use in a month. Once subscribers reach that cap, they will still be able to access data, but throttled, or reduced to a slower speed, to prioritize other users who have not yet reached their limit.

The move by T-Mobile to increase its throttling cap, or its Fair Usage Threshold as the Un-Carrier calls it, started out as a rumor, based on an image of a document that was acquired by Android Central. The document clearly showed that T-Mobile was planning to increase its Fair Usage Threshold to 50 GB starting Sept. 20, from the previous cap of 32 GB.

T-Mobile later confirmed that the throttling cap increase was coming through a tweet by T-Mobile Help.

50 GB T-Mobile Throttling Cap: Is It Enough?

From 23 GB, to 30 GB, and then to 32 GB earlier this year, the T-Mobile One throttling cap will soon be double the amount from where it started, showing that the Un-Carrier is very much capable of handling the extra load. The question, however, is whether that amount of data is enough for most subscribers.

50 GB, even for heavy users, is a lot of data, and barring any massive downloads made on the subscribers' smartphone, should be enough to last for an entire month.

The decision to increase the unlimited data plan's throttling cap comes about a week after the carrier announced that all T-Mobile One unlimited family plan subscribers would be granted free Netflix subscriptions. Having access to Netflix would mean that users would need more data, and T-Mobile has provided just that.

In comparison, the throttling cap of the unlimited data plans of Verizon and AT&T are at 22 GB, while that of Sprint is slightly higher at 23 GB. T-Mobile will very soon offer more than double that capacity to its subscribers, which should attract its legacy customers to switch to T-Mobile One and for customers of other carriers to switch to the Un-Carrier.

techtimes.com

Emerging Technology

Ford Using Hologram Goggles To Design Cars

September 21, 2017

Ford designers can now put on a pair of 3D goggles and see an entire car in the middle of the office. It's a technology that promises to speed up the car design process and make it easier to involve designers on a global scale.

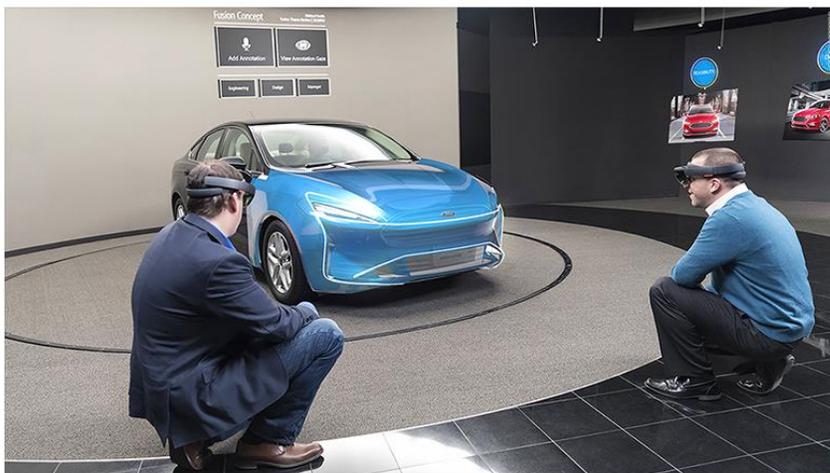
The designers are working with Microsoft's Hologram goggles running software created specifically for the task of designing -- and altering the designs of -- automobiles. With the goggles, designers in different offices can see and work on the same virtual car at the same time.

Car designers already work with 3D computer models but they're usually confined to screens where they can be rotated using a mouse. Or, if designers want to see a life-sized computer model they can walk around like a real car, that usually requires stepping into a special room designed just for that purpose.

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"The designers are working with Microsoft's Hologram goggles running software created specifically for the task of designing -- and altering the designs of -- automobiles."

With the Hololens designers can just put on a headset and the virtual vehicle appears wherever the designer is standing, as if it were parked there. The goggles don't obscure the view of the room or the other people in it so designers can move around and converse as they would looking at a real car.

Because it mixes computer models and the real environment, the goggles can also be used to overlay new designs onto a real car or physical model.



With the Microsoft goggles on, Ford designers can see virtual models as if they were in the room.

In the past, if designers wanted to see how a new grill or taillight design would look on a car, they would print it out on paper and tape it down over a full-sized model of the existing car. With the goggles, said Craig Wetzel, a design manager at Ford, new virtual front or back ends can be laid on right over a real world model.

The devices can be networked so designers working in different locations can work on the same car. If they can't all work at the same time, which can be difficult when people are in different parts of the globe, they can leave virtual notes attached to the model.

For instance, a note could be attached to a headlight that designer thinks should be a different shape. Later, another designer could play back the message. As it plays, a virtual head shows the angle from which the other person was viewing the model when he or she made the comment. That way designers can literally understand the other person's perspective.

For now, the Hololens is still in the experimental stage at Ford, said Wetzel. Designers in Dearborn have worked with it, he said, and the technology is now being introduced globally.

As useful as it might be, the Hololens is not expected to replace other design tools, such as the full-size clay models that, designers say, remain the best tool for seeing what a car will look like in the natural world.

money.cnn.com

Amazon Reportedly Working On Alexa-Enabled Smart Glasses

September 20, 2017

Alexa may be ready to go out on the town.

Amazon is reportedly working on a pair of "smart glasses" that would bring its digital assistant Alexa to a user even when they were out and about, according to a report in the Financial Times.

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"Instead of transmitting sound waves through the air to the listener's ear drums, bone conduction systems send vibrations through the jaw bones or cheek bones."

The glasses would wirelessly tether to a smart phone carried by the wearer.

Unlike Google's failed Google Glass experiment in 2013, in this case users would hear but not see anything from Alexa. It would also not be able to take pictures or video, the privacy issue that led to a widespread consumer backlash against the Google product - though it's since been reborn as a workplace tool.

Google Glass Reborn For The Enterprise Market

The glasses would transmit sound directly to the wearer, allowing him or her to hear Alexa speaking to them and presumably allowing them to speak to Alexa.

The technology this is based on is called "bone-conduction audio." Instead of transmitting sound waves through the air to the listener's ear drums, bone conduction systems send vibrations through the jaw bones or cheek bones. The sound is received directly into the user's inner ear, bypassing the ear drum altogether.

Used by the military and in some hearing aids, the technology is not new but has become much better in the past few years. In fact, that's how Google's Google Glass device transmitted sound to the wearer.

In the case of glass frames, it's likely the vibrations would be sent through the portion of the frames that touch the bones of the wearer's head behind their ears.

Bone conduction is almost inaudible to anyone but the person wearing the device, so Alexa could talk to the wearer without everyone in the vicinity hearing.

Wearable access to computing in various forms is coming into better focus. Facebook this summer patented augmented reality smart glasses that would allow users to see superimposed images of virtual objects in the real world.

Amazon is also planning on releasing smart home hardware devices that would allow viewers to see video from various parts of their home or outside on their Echo Show screen, the Financial Times reported.

The Echo line of Alexa-enabled products has been a surprise hit in the past two years, with "tens of millions" sold according to Amazon.

usatoday.com

Mergers and Acquisitions

Walmart Partners With Smart Lock Maker August To Test In-Home Delivery Of Packages And Groceries

September 21, 2017

Walmart announced today it will begin testing a new service that will allow customers with August smart home devices, like the August doorbell and security cameras, to have their packages delivered inside their home instead of left on the doorstep. This test will also include online grocery orders, which won't just be placed inside the house like the packages, but will be put away in the fridge and freezer, when appropriate.

"The customers will utilize an August smart lock to allow delivery drivers a one-time entry into their home."

The retailer says it will soon start this test in the Silicon Valley area with select customers who have opted into to try the new service.

The customers will utilize an August smart lock to allow delivery drivers a one-time entry into their home. By using these smart home devices, the customer can see the entire delivery process from start to end, beginning with a notification sent to their mobile device.

The deliveries themselves are being handled by Deliv – a service that Walmart-owned Sam’s Club began testing last year for last mile deliveries in Miami.

The Deliv driver will use a one-time passcode to enter the customer’s home with the package or grocery order, then put the cold and frozen groceries away, if need be.

While August is the first smart home partner that Walmart is working with on this effort, presumably, if the tests were successful, Walmart would add other smart home device makers to the list of supported device in the future.

The company didn’t say what this new service would cost, instead noting that pricing is something that the experiment will focus on. In other words, Walmart will try to determine what price a customer is willing to pay for this added convenience.

This is the first time that Walmart had trialed a service where delivery personnel would directly enter a customer’s home, but its subsidiary Jet.com recently struck a deal with smart access provider Latch to improve deliveries in urban markets. In that case, however, residents living in 1,000 apartment buildings were receiving a free Latch system for the exterior door of their building, which would allow them to securely allow access to delivery personnel.

With the August partnership, Walmart customers both inside and outside cities could take advantage of the service, if they were also August device owners.

“We’re excited to be running this test in Silicon Valley with a handful of August Home customers, all of whom have opted-in to participate in testing this new concept,” said Sloan Eddleston, Vice President, Walmart eCommerce Strategy & Business Operations, in Walmart’s announcement. “And we want to do more in the future by delivering groceries and other orders in whatever location works best for our customers – inside the house for some and in the fridge/freezer in the garage for others,” Eddleston added.

The effort is one of many e-commerce innovations the retailer has developed as it continues to battle with Amazon.

In recent months, Walmart has also introduced a membership-free, 2-day shipping program; a pickup discount for those who ship-to-store; curbside grocery pickup and, in some places, delivery through a partnership with Uber. It has been testing other initiatives, too, like using Walmart store staff to drop off customers’ online orders while on their way home.

Walmart didn’t say how long it will run this latest test, or if it plans to expand it in the future to more cities.

techcrunch.com

HubSpot Acquires Chatbot Builder Motion AI

September 21, 2017

HubSpot announced this morning that it has acquired chatbot startup Motion AI.

Motion AI launched in 2015 and offers an editor for building chatbots that work on websites, Facebook Messenger, SMS and Slack, no coding required. Even before the acquisition, the tool was already integrated into HubSpot Free CRM.

The entire Motion AI team, including founder and CEO David Nelson, will be joining HubSpot. The companies also said they'll be sharing more details about the integration plans at HubSpot's Inbound event next week.

"It's impossible to ignore the impact of chat and messaging, not just on the way B2B companies operate, but on society as a whole," said HubSpot CEO Brian Halligan in the acquisition announcement. "We're in the midst of a massive shift as businesses embrace this new platform and consumers come to expect more immediate, always-on communication from brands."

HubSpot (which acquired sales AI startup Kemvi few months ago) isn't sharing the financial terms of the deal. Motion AI has raised funding from Charge Ventures, Crush Ventures and others.

techcrunch.com

Industry Reports

Comcast Looks Forward To More Mergers During Trump Presidency

September 20, 2017

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"Comcast hasn't proposed any big mergers since Trump became president, but in May it announced an agreement with cable company Charter that could lead to a merger with a wireless company."

President Donald Trump said on the campaign trail that his administration would take a tough stance against mergers and consider breaking up Comcast and other conglomerates. But nearly a year into his presidency, it's now clear to Comcast's top government official that the Trump administration will instead allow more mergers than the administration of Barack Obama.

"Overall, this president and this administration is likely less hostile to horizontal growth or even vertical growth in the telecom space and elsewhere," Comcast Senior Executive Vice President David Cohen said in an interview, according to a Recode article today.

Horizontal mergers are deals between companies that make the same goods or services and compete against each other, like the Comcast/Time Warner Cable merger that was blocked by the Obama administration. (Cohen took the lead in pitching that deal to government regulators.) Vertical mergers join companies that operate at different levels of an industry's supply chain.

The Trump administration's apparent willingness to approve both horizontal and vertical mergers isn't a "license for 'anything goes,'" Cohen told Recode. But Cohen said there's "pretty clearly going to be less hostility and a greater willingness to allow the market to work."

That's in stark contrast to statements made by Trump when he was seeking voters' approval. Trump promised to stop AT&T's purchase of Time Warner Inc., which is now on the verge of being approved. Trump also talked about breaking up Comcast, saying, "Comcast's purchase of NBC concentrated far too much power in one massive entity that is trying to tell the voters what to think and what to do. Deals like this destroy democracy, and we'll look at breaking that deal up and other deals like that.

That should never, ever have been approved in the first place; they're trying to poison the mind of the American voter."

No Big Comcast Mergers Under Trump—Yet

Cohen held multiple fundraisers at his home for Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in 2015.

Comcast hasn't proposed any big mergers since Trump became president, but in May it announced an agreement with cable company Charter that could lead to a merger with a wireless company.

Comcast and Charter agreed to cooperate in their plans to sell mobile phone service, and for one year the cable companies will work only with each other when it comes to acquisitions in the wireless industry.

Comcast and Charter then held some talks with Sprint, though nothing came of them.

"We're not out there saying, 'Oh my god, to survive we need something else to buy,'" Cohen said. "On the other hand, we have never viewed ourselves from being foreclosed from the acquisition marketplace, either domestically or internationally."

Verizon CEO Lowell McAdam said in April that he'd be willing to have merger talks with just about any company, including Comcast, although more recently McAdam said he's no longer interested in merging with a cable company.

Cohen Skeptical About Sinclair/Tribune Merger

Cohen doesn't necessarily want every merger to be approved. He expressed skepticism about Sinclair Broadcast Group's attempt to complete an acquisition of Tribune Media Company that would let Sinclair reach 72 percent of TV-owning households in the US.

Cohen said the merger might have some "potential good things for [Comcast], particularly on the NBCUniversal side," but that it could also raise cable rates.

"I think having that large a bloc of local broadcast affiliates, it almost inevitably [will] put significant upward pressure on retransmission consent fees, which are the No. 1 driver of increases in cable prices for consumers these days," Cohen told Recode.

Of course, the Comcast-owned NBC also charges programming fees to other cable companies, contributing to the high prices paid by subscribers of many TV services. That's one reason some Democratic lawmakers oppose the combination of telecom providers and programmers—a cable company that owns TV channels can drive up the rates its competitors pay for content.

But despite Trump's campaign statement, there is no indication that Comcast and NBC will be broken up. And Cohen seems confident that Comcast wouldn't meet any great resistance from the Trump administration if it tries to buy another cable company or programming giant.

arstechnica.com

Texas Latest State To Opt-In To FirstNet, Brings Total To 23

September 20, 2017

AT&T's nationwide first responder network scored approval for a build out from Texas on Tuesday – the largest state so far to opt-in to FirstNet.

Texas joins Idaho and Maryland, which also opted in this week, bringing the number of states and territories to sign on up to 23, past the 40 percent mark.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott on Tuesday accepted AT&T and FirstNet's plan to build, operate, and maintain a highly secure wireless broadband communications network for the state's public safety community.

"The safety and security of Texas communities is my number one priority, and I want to provide our first responders with the best technology possible," Governor Abbott commented. "As we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, our first responders are often the last and only hope for safety in rapidly-changing and life-threatening situations, but this partnership with FirstNet and AT&T, allows Texas's fire, police, EMS, and other public safety personnel to be better equipped when responding in these emergencies."

Tennessee, New Jersey, and New Mexico, are among the other states to approve a FirstNet build.

Governors in all 56 states and territories have the option to choose FirstNet or opt out and go with another service provider, however any alternative network must be interoperable with FirstNet.

Rivada Networks is aiming to be another option for states, as is Verizon, which announced plans in August to build its own dedicated network core for first responders.

Verizon indicated it will offer multi-band devices that provide Band 14 access and enable full interoperability with Band 14 radio access networks deployed by FirstNet.

wirelessweek.com



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