

The Virgin Islands Consortium

AT&T Will Build Territory's Broadband First Responder Network If Governor Takes Advice Of B.I.T. Director

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ST. THOMAS -- In March, AT&T was chosen by the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) -- an independent authority within the U.S. Department of Commerce authorized by Congress in 2012, to develop, build and operate the nationwide broadband network that equips first responders to save lives and protect U.S. communities.

The FirstNet network will cover all 50 states, 5 U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, including rural communities and tribal lands in those states and territories. This includes the U.S. Virgin Islands, but in order for AT&T to build the network in the territory, the Government of the Virgin Islands must first opt-in, according to Bureau of Information Technology (B.I.T.) Director Angelo Riddick, speaking during B.I.T.'s budget hearing at

the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Thursday.

If Governor Kenneth Mapp opts in, which Mr. Riddick says he has recommended to the governor, federal funding provided since 2013 will be released to AT&T to build the system. The new network would benefit the territory's first responders -- firefighters, police officers, EMS and the territory's Rescue organizations. But there's benefit to the wider community as well, as the new network also calls for cellular service to be available throughout the islands and in even the most remote locations.

"This is great news for the territory," Mr. Riddick said. "The expansion of the AT&T network will not only benefit first responders, but the community as a whole. B.I.T. is assembling an advisory committee comprised of legal, financial, and technical experts, whom are responsible for reviewing the State Plan upon receipt. The team will work to vet the plan, and will collaborate with FirstNet to ensure the plan fulfills the coverage, reliability, capability, and security needs of the territory, prior to the governor's opt-in/opt-



B.I.T. Director Angelo Riddick (Ernice Gilbert,

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He said local jobs would also be created. However, Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly reminded that training would first need to occur if Virgin Islanders were to gain employment.

"I want us to know what kind of skill set will be required," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said to Mr. Riddick. Without the requisite skills, AT&T would have to import employees. "Let's really connect the dots right here, right now. I'm going to ask you to prepare our territory, prepare our workforce to really avail themselves of those jobs when AT&T lands here, assuming the governor follows your advice," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. Mr. Riddick said would "absolutely" do so.

Federal dollars available for the project currently stand at \$595,628, which will be available through fiscal year 2018, according to Mr. Riddick.

In addition to creating a nationwide seamless, IP-based, high-speed mobile communications network that will give first responders priority access, the network will help:

- Improve rescue and recovery operations to help keep first responders out of harm's way
- Better connect first responders to the critical information they need in an emergency

- Further the development of public safety focused [IoT](#) and Smart City solutions such as providing near real-time information on traffic conditions to determine the fastest route to an emergency
- Enable advanced capabilities, like wearable sensors and cameras for police and firefighters, and camera-equipped drones and robots that can deliver near real-time images of events, such as fires, floods or crimes

FirstNet and AT&T will innovate and evolve the network to keep the public safety community at the forefront of technology advances. For example, as 5G network capabilities develop in the coming years, FirstNet and AT&T will work together to provide the exponential increases in the speed with which video and data travel across the FirstNet network.

"We are honored to work with FirstNet to build a network for America's police, firefighters and EMS that is second to none. This is an unprecedented public-private investment in infrastructure that makes America a leader and public safety a national priority," said Randall Stephenson, AT&T chairman and CEO [in a release issued in March](#) following AT&T's successful bid.

"Today is a landmark day for public safety across the Nation and shows the incredible progress we can make through public-private partnerships," added U.S. Department of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross on March 30. "FirstNet is a critical infrastructure project that will give our first responders the communications tools they need to keep America safe and secure. This public-private partnership will also spur innovation and create over ten thousand new jobs in this cutting-edge sector."

The FirstNet network is one of two important projects at B.I.T. The other is the 911 Tower Site Enhancement Project (TSEP), which was initiated in June 2013, according to B.I.T. The cost of the TSEP, whose nature appear to be similar to that of FirstNet, was estimated at \$2.6 million. However, B.I.T. anticipates that an additional \$1.041 million will be needed to complete the project, whose costs include: lay/repair roads at a cost of \$70,000, test soil/lay foundation at a cost of 297,000, materials/electrical repair at a cost of \$119,000, transport and erect towers at a cost of \$111,000, move/install antennas at a cost of \$99,000, install security and landscaping at a cost of \$140,000, installation of extender at a cost of \$15,000, and \$190,000 set aside for contingency.

B.I.T.'s 2018 budget totals \$5,389,215, which is not much higher than 2017's.

Finance Committee members seemed general pleased with Mr. Riddick's performance, [whose tenure began in October 2016](#). His employees seemed general at ease at the hearing, a good sign, according to Senator Kurt VIALET, whose cellphone had not beeped with text messages while Mr. Riddick gave testimony. Mr. VIALET said his phone oftentimes receive multiple notifications from employees of various departments and agencies when testimonies are being placed on record by the leaders of these government arms, but not one text message came in during Mr. Riddick's testimony, he said.

Asked by Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly to grade the morale of his employees on a scale from 1 to 5. Mr. Riddick, who first said it was not his place to decide, later rated his employees' morale at 10/5 -- five notches above the given scale.

"I would give them about a 10," Mr. Riddick said confidently. And the reason why is I'm a different individual. I have required my staff to participate in professional development, and I talk about the four Ps... and one of them is professionalism. I think that we have very talented individuals in the Virgin Islands not exclusive to B.I.T., but talented individuals here that don't get the exposure that they need to agencies, conferences, trade shows and other people who work in their area of expertise. And one of the things that I did is that I want to make sure that my people travel so I'm not the smartest guy in the room," Mr. Riddick said.

He concluded by stating his end goal relative to his employees is that someone within B.I.T. be chosen to lead the bureau once his tenure ends.