FirstNet turns to InfoVista for network-planning tool
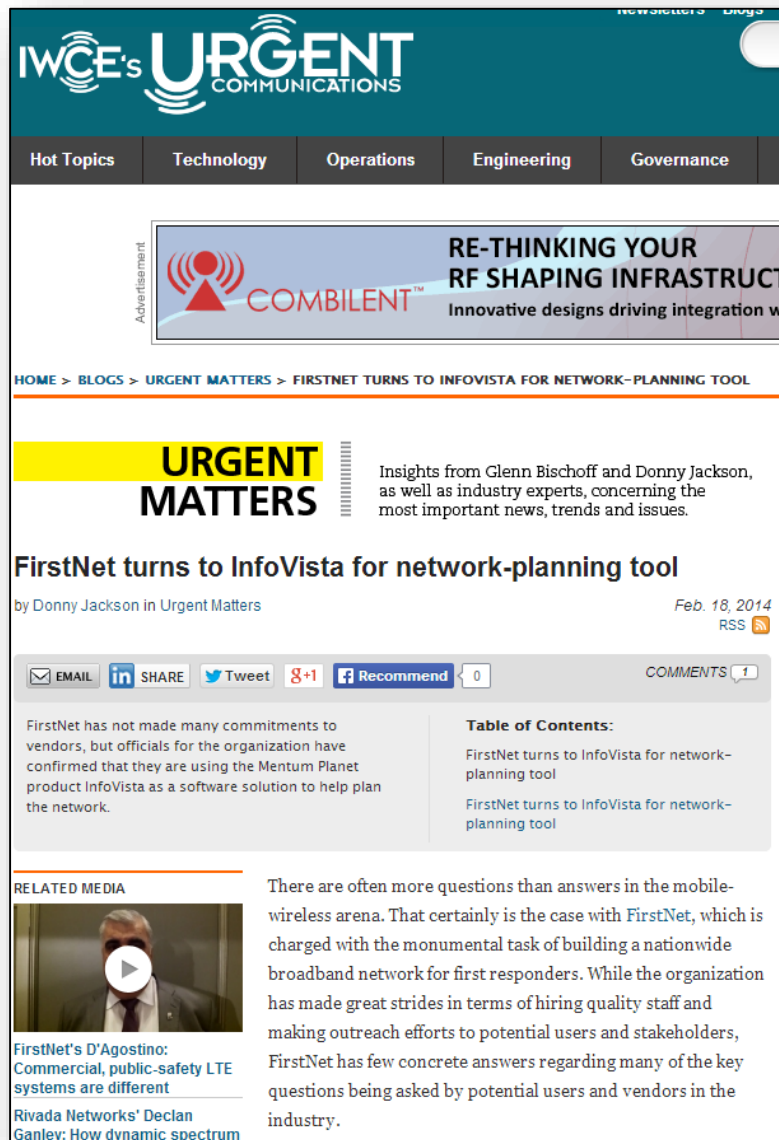
Urgent Communications

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There are often more questions than answers in the mobile-wireless arena. That certainly is the case with FirstNet, which is charged with the monumental task of building a nationwide broadband network for first responders. While the organization has made great strides in terms of hiring quality staff and making outreach efforts to potential users and stakeholders, FirstNet has few concrete answers regarding many of the key questions being asked by potential users and vendors in the industry.

What will the network look like? Who will build it and how will it be procured? When will it be deployed in my geographical area? How much will subscribers pay to access the network? What is the long-term business model? Who will be FirstNet's key partners? These are some of the questions that are on the minds of stakeholders that don't have clear answers yet, for myriad reasons, that will be the subject of future columns.

There has been considerable angst within the vendor community around the fact that considerable resources have been spent proposing potential solutions to FirstNet for more than a year, but commitments and contracts to use any of them remain elusive.

One exception to this is InfoVista, a software company focused on wireless-network planning, including backhaul requirements and network service assurance. In one of the few outright statements regarding a vendor, FirstNet officials have confirmed that InfoVista's Mentum Planet solution—typically referenced as "Planet" in the industry—is the network-planning tool they are using in these early stages of designing the terrestrial network and estimating costs.

InfoVista supports planning for both radio-frequency (RF) and Internet Protocol (IP) planning, which makes it ideal for supporting the FirstNet initiative, according to Jason Suplita, director of public safety at InfoVista. Another feature of the InfoVista solution is that it supports a view that depicts the overlay of an LMR network over LTE plans, Suplita said. This promises to be important, because both types of communications systems are expected to be operated simultaneously in most locations for several years, according to most industry analysts.

Perhaps the key characteristic of the software is that it supports collaboration based on input from many different sources and enables users to consider different network-design scenarios—a key attribute, given FirstNet's desire to design networks with significant input from states and territories.

"What our tool does is it allows you to look at different options and the analysis for the options that you want to choose for using various assets in the state," Suplita said during an interview with IWCE's Urgent Communications.

Fundamentally, there are two types of access to InfoVista: an engineer mode that requires a four-day certification course and would enable a user to directly input data into the system, and an executive mode that can be accessed via a web portal that provides a bigger-picture perspective that would allow consideration of various scenarios but no changes in underlying data.

"For a non-engineer, you have access to the engineering-management solution, a collaboration hub that allows you to have access to stakeholder information," Suplita said, noting that the InfoVista web portal interface is very intuitive.

"For the governor to receive access to the network, it's as simple as using Google Earth," he said. "You can click on a button, put a password in, and it pops up information on the network and where the rollout is at any given time in the state—executive information. There's no need for training on that."

InfoVista offers the four-day classes designed for engineer certification to use its solution on a monthly basis in Dallas, and the company is exploring options to offer more educational opportunities in a variety of venues, Suplita said. In terms of pricing to use its software solution, InfoVista has created a package specifically designed for those who are participating in the FirstNet initiative, he said.

"InfoVista is offering a specific public-safety bundle, which includes all the necessary licenses and geodata that are identical in configuration to what FirstNet is using," Suplita said. "We're offering that in a bundle to state-level [users], consultants and vendors."

http://urgentcomm.com/blog/firstnet-turns-infovista-network-planning-tool?page=1