

Dallas Business Journal - April 12, 2010  
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# Dallas Business Journal

Friday, April 9, 2010

## AT&T, other carriers predict shortage of mobile space

Focus on wireless could push out TV broadcasters

Dallas Business Journal - by [Jeff Bounds](#) Staff writer

Wireless spectrum is like lanes on a freeway, sending wireless video, data or phone calls to devices such as [Apple's](#) iPhone.

But just like Dallas' North Central Expressway is getting more crowded over time, and thus slower, the growing proliferation of bandwidth-hungry devices like the iPhone is making the airwaves more congested.

Experts all agree that a shortage of wireless spectrum is looming; some say one already exists. For users of mobile devices, the result could potentially be slower, less reliable connections to the Web. That leads to upset customers, which in turn could lead to problems for carriers of wireless phone, data and video services.

Jason Hillery, a spokesman for [AT&T](#), said the Dallas-based carrier has seen a 5,000% increase in mobile broadband traffic on its network in the past three years.

"When you see that growth, you see the writing on the wall," Hillery said. "You begin to see that spectrum (in the) immediate or longer term is a potential area of concern."

Estimates of the amount of spectrum currently available for broadband use range from 414.5 megahertz to 583 megahertz, according to a February study by the Technology Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank. Another 50 MHz is in the pipeline, meaning it has been identified as being suitable for broadband use and at some point will be auctioned to wireless carriers by regulators.

But in a November filing with the [Federal Communications Commission](#), a Washington, D.C., trade group called CTIA-The Wireless Association said the wireless industry will need an additional 800 MHz of spectrum to keep up with growing consumer demand.

Christopher Guttman-McCabe, vice president of regulatory affairs at CTIA, said "There must be a focus on getting spectrum to market, so carriers can continue to meet demand."

### A finite resource

The need for spectrum may wind up leaving somebody out in the cold, because there is only a limited amount of the stuff, coupled with ever-increasing demand.

"Spectrum is a finite resource," said Derek Khlopin, head of regulation and policy in Washington, D.C., for [Nokia Siemens Networks](#), a large telecom-equipment vendor whose North American headquarters is in Irving. "Today, there's arguably not a crisis. But it's one that's on the horizon."

Technology alone won't fix the spectrum issue — but it can help, he said. For instance, most wireless carriers are shifting their networks toward a fourth-generation wireless technology standard called Long Term Evolution, or LTE for short. LTE is perceived as more "spectrally efficient" than third-generation wireless technology, Khlopin said.

There are other technical fixes, such as upgrading wireless antenna sites.

"At some point, you can only do so much with that spectrum. But there are incremental improvements," Khlopin said.

Ultimately, however, for wireless carriers to get the extra bandwidth they need, it will have to come from somewhere else — and likely from somebody who is using it now.

That somebody could wind up being television broadcasters.

### FCC's game plan

In a broadband plan submitted to Congress last month, the Federal Communications Commission proposed making 500 MHz of spectrum available for broadband use in the next 10 years, including 300 MHz by 2015. Around 180 MHz could come relatively easily, with the agency collecting unused spectrum from past auctions and the like.

But another 120 MHz would come from TV broadcasters, FCC documents say. The plan seeks to encourage the stations to give up the spectrum voluntarily, with broadcasters receiving part of the proceeds from the spectrum when it was re-auctioned. But the document also suggests that the FCC could impose more drastic changes if broadcasters don't cooperate, published accounts say.

Perhaps not surprisingly, broadcasters aren't wild about that plan.

Dennis Wharton, executive vice president of the **National Association of Broadcasters** in Washington, D.C., notes that last year, television stations surrendered around 108 MHz of spectrum as part of the move from analog to digital television. “It’s puzzling to us why the FCC is saying that broadcasters have to give back 120 MHz (of spectrum) when the 108 MHz hasn’t been deployed” by the wireless industry, he said.

The NAB supports legislation moving through Congress that would give a full accounting of all the uses of spectrum.

“Before you start jeopardizing free and local TV service, we think it’s imperative that policymakers get a full accounting of what spectrum might be available or might be unused,” Wharton said.

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