



River Forest Fire Department

Chief Thomas Gaertner

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January 16, 2026

The Honorable Deb Fischer
Chair
Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Media
United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Ben Ray Luján
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Media
United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

RE: Support for FirstNet Reauthorization

Dear Chair Fischer and Ranking Member Luján:

As Congress considers the reauthorization of FirstNet, the River Forest Fire Department strongly supports reauthorization consistent with the original statutory framework established in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012. We do not support changes to the governance or management oversight structure created in that legislation.

For police chiefs, fire chiefs, and public safety executives nationwide, FirstNet is not an abstract policy concept. It is a daily operational system that supports incident command, responder safety, coordinated response, and disaster operations. In our own department, FirstNet's priority and preemption capabilities have proven critical during major incidents, ensuring our crews maintain reliable communications when commercial networks are congested or compromised. Its success is directly attributable to Congress's decision to vest governance authority in an independent entity with strong public safety representation.

That structure reflects a deliberate legislative determination that public safety practitioners are best positioned to guide the development, investment, and operational priorities of a nationwide public safety broadband network. Modifying this framework risks weakening public safety's voice and undermine the stability that mission critical communications require.

Existing law provides robust accountability through independent annual audits conducted by the Department of Commerce, which have consistently led to program improvements when needed. This balanced oversight model distinguishes FirstNet and helps ensure its continued success.

FirstNet is widely recognized as one of the most successful public-private partnerships ever established by Congress. Notably, it has achieved this success without additional taxpayer appropriations beyond those originally authorized, a remarkable accomplishment that demonstrates the effectiveness of the current governance structure. Any consideration of changes to governance or oversight should occur only through a formal reauthorization process that preserves Congress's original intent and meaningfully engages the public safety community.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's leadership and continued commitment to America's first responders.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Gaertner", with a stylized, cursive script.

Thomas Gaertner
Fire Chief
River Forest Fire Department (Illinois)