

Untitled document

By Garry Rayno

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CONCORD — Public safety could be at risk if a proposed high-power wireless broadband system interferes with the Global Positioning Service (GPS) network, say safety, aviation and business officials.

Second District Congressman Charles F. Bass wrote to the Federal Communications Commission this week urging the agency to do a thorough review of LightSquared's proposal to build a network of 40,000, high-powered base stations across the country. Concerns have been raised that the system would interfere with the GPS system, affecting millions of users throughout the country, including emergency and public safety responders, aviators and travelers, as well as national defense and the commercial GPS industry.

At a press conference at Concord Airport Wednesday, Bass, a member of the House Subcommittee on Communications and Technology, said "I have serious concerns about LightSquared's base stations overwhelming this vital network and urge the FCC to thoroughly review this serious matter."

LightSquared owns the radio spectrum next to the L band used by the GPS system, and there is the potential for interference, Bass explained. Craig Fuller, president and CEO of Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, said there is no doubt the company's original proposal would interfere with the GPS network.

Bass and others said the GPS system is not only vital to businesses, public safety, and transportation systems but to national defense. The FCC should ensure interference questions are resolved before LightSquared is allowed to build out its system, he said.

In his letter, Bass asked the agency to hold a public comment period, to consult with other federal agencies on the possibility of GPS interference, terminate the company's conditional authority to build the network if there is evidence of interference, and to consider any further LightSquared proposals only at the commission level.

Bass also noted that the agency used an abbreviated process to solicit comments and issue a decision allowing spectrum use without a vote of the commission. "In the normal course, interference testing is conducted before a new spectrum use is permitted, but afterwards," Bass wrote.

Chris Stern, LightSquared spokesman, said the proposal will have a thorough review as part of the permitting process, noting it has been before the FCC for more than eight years. "It's not like suddenly it's being rushed through the FCC at all," he said.

Stern said the company will file a five-month study with the FCC this week on possible interference with the GPS system. He said the study indicates the original plan poses

interference to many GPS receivers, but he noted the company proposed an alternative plan with FCC earlier this month that uses a lower spectrum away from the GPS range.

The plan "resolves the GPS issue for 99.5 percent of all commercial GPS devices. The other .5 percent are high precision devices," Stern said, used in such things as construction, agriculture and surveying.

"We acknowledge there is an issue and we are working with the industry to fix it," Stern said. "The new plan will take care of many of the issues Congressman Charlie Bass is concerned about."

State Fish and Game Major Kevin Jordan said any interference with the GPS network could have a significant impact. He said the system allowed emergency responders to "improve response time and literally saved lives" by routing vehicles directly to a location.

He said in the northern part of the state where there is still little cell phone coverage and radio service is spotty, search and rescue teams depend on GPS signals. All grid searches are conducted on GPS lines, Jordan said, and any interference with those signals will affect rescues.

Bruce Hutchings, former manager of the Mount Washington Regional Airport in Whitefield, said the GPS system has become a major factor in aviation today making small airports vital and valuable again.

Carol Miller, director of broadband technologies for the state Department of Resources and Economic Development, called the issue critical for New Hampshire. While the state promotes broad band investment in rural and under-served areas of the state, she said, "this (proposal) could have unintended consequences."

LightSquared proposes a land-based 4G wireless network that would provide coverage to 98 percent of America with satellite coverage for areas the towers don't reach, said Stern. "This is the best chances for many parts of rural America to have high-speed broadband," he said. "The network is especially important for rural American, which still finds itself on the wrong side of the digital divide, unfortunately."

LightSquared would sell the service wholesale to companies that could then offer plans to customers. A retail company selling an iPad could include a broadband plan, Stern said.