

REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER BRENDAN CARR
AT THE WIRELESS INFRASTRUCTURE ASSOCIATION'S
CONNECT(X): ALL ACCESS CONFERENCE

“ENABLING THE 5G UPGRADE”

MAY 19, 2020

Thank you to the Wireless Infrastructure Association and to the tower crews you represent for the invitation to address your conference. As you all know, this event was originally scheduled to take place in Miami, Florida. So like LeBron James before me, I was really looking forward to taking my talents (or, more appropriately, my lack thereof) to South Beach. In the end, though, joining you all virtually from my office here in Southwest D.C. almost replicates that South Beach vibe.

Thank you to Jonathan Adelstein and his team for allowing the show to go online. I'm glad to join you all and share some positive news about the FCC's ongoing work to promote our country's 5G leadership. And I look forward to joining you afterwards in the Connect(X) live chat to hear your perspectives on upgrading our nation's infrastructure.

Since 2017, I have been leading the FCC's efforts to modernize our infrastructure rules and accelerate the buildout of 5G in communities across the country. Those reforms have helped you all—America's broadband builders—secure the strongest 5G platform in the world right here in the U.S.

The first commercial launch of 5G happened here in 2018, and since then, you all have been busy building out this infrastructure in communities across the country. 5G services are now live, not just in places you might expect like New York and San Francisco, but in places like Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I think that is a much better measure of the progress we're making in securing U.S. leadership in 5G.

The 5G platform that you are building already is beginning to improve everyday Americans' lives. One provider is now using 5G to give families another choice for home Internet service. You don't have to know much about tech or telecom to understand how popular that is. VR, AR, autonomous vehicles, remote surgeries—almost any of the buzzy inventions that America is working on right now won't work or won't work well without 5G.

None of these improvements in our lives happen spontaneously. There is no pixie dust that lights up wireless networks. There is no magic spell that turns steel into a tower. The public is aware of our country's tech talent. They know Silicon Valley as a place—and as a TV show. The legend of a young person with only an idea and a garage is familiar to them. What are less well known are all of the other 5G workers. Those who trade hoodies and coffee shops for hard hats and steel towers. And if it were not for *those* 5G workers, none of the rest of the 5G economy would exist.

FCC leadership knows you. You're not strangers to us. We've climbed towers with you, and occasionally pitched in on a radio swap. We've spliced fiber and dug a few trenches. Being with infrastructure builders has given us an appreciation of the importance and the challenges of your work. And so we've tried to make your jobs a little easier.

In March of 2018, we modernized our historic and environmental reviews to reflect increasing deployment of small cells. We meant to capture the commonsense notion that a small cell the size of a backpack has less of an impact on its surroundings than a 200-foot macro tower, and so the federal review process for small cells and macros should be different.

In September of 2018, we set guardrails on local approval of small cells. That included our decision to address outlier fees that were making infrastructure builds too costly.

Over the last few months, you have told me how the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges. You're making sure your crews stay healthy while giving them a shot at providing for their families. The usual approval processes—involving state and local agencies, the federal government, and Tribes—have been slow, as we all are stretched thin and respond to so many of our citizens' urgent needs.

I want to commend local governments and industry, including WIA, for viewing this slowdown as a problem we can solve together. WIA collaborated with local governments to create best practices to approve siting even when staff is sheltered at home.

And I am also grateful for the new and first Chairwoman of the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Aimee Jorjani, who President Trump appointed last year. She's a problem-solver. She understands that preserving history and building infrastructure don't have to be in conflict, and if we get smart about our policies, industry and government can work together for all Americans. I'm optimistic that with her leadership we will be able to streamline processes to approve wireless infrastructure during this pandemic. Because if this pandemic has taught us something about telecom, it's how important staying connected is for work, school, and health.

As America gets back to work, infrastructure builders in particular are faced with a pressing issue: how to quickly upgrade America's wireless infrastructure. We know more towers need to be built to cover every American and to offer rural families choice for high-speed service. We know that tens of thousands of small cells need to be deployed this year to boost capacity. But we also know that much of that work will be for upgrades—putting new tech on old steel, replacing 4G or even 3G antennas with 5G.

Policymakers have long understood the value of reusing physical infrastructure. There's a lot of process involved in building a new tower—the permits, the public meetings. But once a tower is up, there shouldn't be much concern about taking old boxes down and putting new ones up. That's why in 2012 Congress passed a provision called 6409. That section of law says that a local government must approve attaching, removing, or replacing equipment on an existing structure so long as the modification doesn't substantially change the structure's size. The FCC wrote regulations implementing the law in 2014. We defined which modifications qualify for streamlined review and which don't. And we set a 60-day shot clock on local approval.

Congress's decision and our rules helped to separate difficult approval decisions from easy ones. You don't need an engineering degree to understand that a lot more is involved in building a tower from scratch than swapping out a box that's already on one. And so by separating the wheat from the chaff, if you will, we're able to focus the approval process on the projects that require the most attention.

Over the last six years, we've all learned a lot about this process. In the thousands of interactions between local governments and infrastructure companies each year, there are many different interpretations of our rules. Some of that ambiguity can be ironed out in the give-and-take of getting the job done. However, sometimes our rules are being read to delay or block what should be straightforward projects. That drives up costs and denies Americans next-generation service that they deserve.

Getting this right—implementing Congress's directive correctly—has taken on new urgency. That's because we're in the midst of a series of critical wireless upgrades.

We're in the midst of an upgrade to 5G. At stake are jobs, education, and American economic leadership. Most of the time, this upgrade will require attaching new radios and antennas to existing towers and hauling away old equipment—exactly what our expedited process should make easy.

We're in the midst of an upgrade for first responders, as well. Wireless companies are building dedicated networks for first responders or expanding capacity to give them the tools to save lives. Almost all of the time, this will be accomplished through tower modifications.

And we're in the midst of an upgrade for competition, especially for rural America. Partly due to our decision approving the combination of T-Mobile and Sprint, that company is building out 5G to nearly every U.S. household. DISH is required to build a brand new wireless broadband network, as well. This is spurring a competitive response and new investment from other wireless providers, cable companies, and scrappy WISPs alike. To be done efficiently and quickly, much of this new technology will be attached to existing structures, including large or what we call "macro" towers.

In the midst of all of these critical upgrades, we need to upgrade our rules. And so I am pleased to tell you that three weeks from today the FCC will vote for an upgrade. I call it our 5G Upgrade Order. The draft of the order will be available to the public this afternoon, but I want to share with you a few of the reforms the order makes:

- First, we make sure that 60 days means 60 days. There is some confusion about when the FCC's existing shot clock starts. So we clarify that when the wireless builder takes the first step that a locality requires and submits documents that show the project qualifies for expedited review, the 60-day shot clock begins. It's a simple yet meaningful clarification.
- Next, we clarify what equipment can go on the existing structure. We reiterate that individual pieces of transmission equipment are not themselves "cabinets," and that up to four equipment cabinets are allowed per request, not cumulatively. We also clarify how a modification can increase a tower's height to allow 20 feet of distance between antennas.
- We then emphasize the distinction between concealment elements and other conditions of approval that relate to aesthetics. Concealment elements that cannot be defeated in a modification apply only to stealthed structures, like a wireless tower made to look like a tree or flagpole. Certain aesthetic conditions also must be upheld, but we explain that they can't be enforced in a way that negates our other rules that promote streamlined approval.
- Finally, we seek comment on additional issues that touch on the expansion of existing sites.

These actions are meant, once again, to separate the difficult project approvals from the easier ones. This will allow local governments and tower crews to focus their efforts on projects that merit more detailed review.

The 5G Upgrade Order is informed by months of engagement with local governments and industry, including WIA and CTIA, whose FCC petitions are addressed in the order. We are grateful for your continued participation in this process as we all seek to upgrade America's wireless networks and extend U.S. leadership in 5G.

I look forward to discussing the 5G Upgrade Order and other topics with you in the chat room now. Thank you again for your time and your contributions to America's infrastructure.