The Daily Dish

Upgrading the Wireless Spectrum Infrastructure

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Artificial intelligence (AI) and its related infrastructure — data centers, electricity generation stations, and the like — have gotten so much attention that plain, old-fashioned wireless communications have seemingly been forgotten. So it is important not to let Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Carr's announcement last week get lost in the semiquincentennial shuffle. The FCC announced that if would vote July 22 on a plan to auction 160 megahertz (MHz) of spectrum in the so-called upper C-band.

This is badly needed. Wireless demands are expected to quadruple by 2031. "Enterprise and industrial traffic is no longer a secondary story. It is growing as fast as or faster than consumer traffic, led by AI copilots, robotics, agentic industrial automation, AR [augmented reality] experience, and always-connected operations." As was once noted when facing another behemoth, the United States is gonna need a bigger boat.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) had required the FCC to make a plan to auction 100 MHz within the C-band. While more is better, and the prospect of 160 MHz is very appealing, there are three more reasons to like this plan. First, it will create a unified C-band. The 160 megahertz of mid-band spectrum — the 3.98–4.14 gigahertz (GHz) range — will be combined with the lower C-band spectrum previously auctioned to make a 440 MHz "super-band" (the FCC's language) spanning 3.70 GHz to 4.14 GHz.

Second, the FCC coordinated effectively with the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). Recall the last time around the Biden FCC and FAA couldn't get out of each other's way. The FAA ended up issuing an air traffic safety alert over possible interference from 5G to airplanes' altimeters. Verizon and AT&T cooked up a plan to operate at low power for 6 months while the whole mess got figured out. This time around, the FAA is mandating altimeter upgrades before commercial wireless operations begin in the band.

And, third, coordination is great, but the plan also puts money on the table to cover retrofitting and relocation costs for those affected by the auction.

More spectrum is needed and auctions are the best way to allocate spectrum. Unfortunately, they have had a tendency to be slow processes. This is a timely proposal that will quickly deliver spectrum to the market.