



ROBERT ATKINSON

Chairman
North American Numbering Council

Part Two

Robert Atkinson assumed the chairmanship of NANC in June 2001, replacing John Hoffman. In August, *NANPA Numbering News* talked with Atkinson, former Deputy Chief of the FCC's Common Carrier Bureau and current Policy Research Director with the Columbia Institute for Tele-Information at Columbia University's Business School. Part One of the interview focused on how to strike a balance between calls for enlarging the supply of numbers and demands for greater conservation. In Part Two, Chairman Atkinson looks at NANC's oversight responsibilities, its key function, and its future, as well as that of the telecommunications industry.

What issues other than that of number supplies do you see before NANC?

Well, there are always periodic issues of NeuStar's contract. In addition, we have the bidding of contracts for NANPA and the current pooling contract. Providing various oversight recommendations of the contractor is an important part of NANC's responsibility, because the FCC doesn't have the capability or the day-to-day interaction with the contractor. I think the FCC properly places a lot of weight on the opinions of NANC, which represent the opinions of both the users and consumers and other government bodies in evaluating whether NeuStar is doing a good, bad, or indifferent job.

When you look more broadly at NANC, where do you see the organization going? Will there be changes at NANC?

The NANC charter clearly lays out NANC's role and responsibilities. I expect we will continue in the same role of being an advisor and providing oversight and guidance to other industry organizations on guidelines and similar matters.

What do you feel are NANC's strengths and weaknesses? What are its greatest accomplishments?

I think its greatest accomplishment will be getting industry consensus and encouraging such things as thousand-block number pooling. Its strength is consensus—establishing a consensus on what is, by definition, a complicated technical, economic, and political issue of how to ensure an adequate supply of numbers.

The FCC could not, in my opinion, make decisions based on its normal process of proposed rulemakings or inquiries. In a normal straight rulemaking environment, everybody unfortunately takes fairly aggressive positions, with the expectation that the FCC will come up with some sort of a compromise. That is not the best means for decision making, particularly for technical decisions. A compromise is possibly just as bad as any alternative, and it may satisfy absolutely nobody. With one foot in the fire and one foot

in the freezer, on average, you're comfortable. Well, that really doesn't help.

Clearly, the FCC set up NANC because its normal processes were just not well suited for this kind of decision making. NANC allows all the stakeholders to get together once a month or so. My job, in a sense, is to get these parties together, go through these issues, and find a consensus. I must work with people on all sides of the agenda and start to understand the real problems of organizations that have different views. And I think just the mere process of discussion, of having coffee with other people and getting a better handle on the underlying problems of the various stakeholders, allows people of good will to find a consensus and a middle ground that isn't just one foot in the fire, one foot in the freezer, but is a rational, thoughtful decision—and a result that actually satisfies most parties.

Therefore, a NANC recommendation can go to the FCC, which can then put it out for public comment via its normal process. But the proposal itself has a strong basis. It's been well thought out and has broad support across the entire range of stakeholders. Now, the FCC has a relatively easy job. So it's a way the FCC can make rational decisions relatively quickly and can make better decisions than it could without an organization like NANC.

How do you think the telecommunications industry has changed?

The two things that I think gave rise to the numbering crisis of a few years ago were the rapidly increasing number of carriers and the rapidly increasing number of services. Probably, in the long run, those two trends will continue.

I think we should always assume that there will be more carriers, more service providers, more services, and more consumers. I don't think we should get complacent with the idea that 10, 15, 20 years from now the telecomm industry will look the same as it does today. I think we should always assume more of everything and incorporate the concept into NANC thinking. Because if we're wrong, I don't think there's any harm. But we'll be terribly worse off if we stick our heads in the sand. ■