

AT&T Network Chief Highlights Small Cell Deployments

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AT&T is big on small cells. In fact, the company is set to deploy over 40,000 small cells by the end of 2014.

Speaking at the Jefferies 2013 Global Technology conference, Bill Smith, president of AT&T's network operations, small cells are a key tool in the carrier's toolbox for maintaining the vitality of AT&T's wireless network going forward.

Smith said he thinks of small cells as a "surgical tool" that will allow AT&T to address specific areas with a cost-effective solution that's also aesthetically pleasing.

"As beautiful as I think a new cell site might be, a lot of people don't share my enthusiasm," Smith said, noting that small cells can be attached to the top of every third or fourth power pole in a given area.

Smith said LTE-enabled small cells will help AT&T improve its voice service in areas where it has suffered in the past. Part of that improvement will come from a Voice over LTE (VoLTE) solution that will fall back from LTE to UMTS.

"I leave it up to the marketing folks to decide what we launch and when we launch. But I can tell you on the network side, we're getting ready, in some of our markets, to be prepared for a turn up [VoLTE] by the end of this year," Smith said.

Smith said it would be a much easier deployment if the system didn't have to fall back to UMTS, but he said an LTE-only solution would offer a poor user experience.

AT&T's small cell deployments are part of a major network improvement project. In all, Smith said AT&T is set to invest \$21 billion in its network this year.

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