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AT&T Has LTE Small Cells 'in the Lab'

AT&T's HSPA+ metrocells are getting ready for nationwide prime time, with the operator testing combo LTE/3G & Wi-Fi units in the lab

By Dan Jones, [Light Reading](#)

April 04, 2013

URL: <http://www.lightreading.com/at-t/att-has-lte-small-cells-in-the-lab/240152270>

[AT&T Inc.](#) now has small cells in the lab that combine 3G, 4G and Wi-Fi and is gearing up for a nationwide launch of the technology that will be part of its HSPA+ network.

"Small cells" has been the blanket term for a new breed of tiny base station that can be used to increase data speeds, voice coverage and network density as data traffic grows. As you'll see, for AT&T these little radios will come in several flavors.

The operator's senior VP of small cells, Gordon Mansfield, was on hand at AT&T's Innovation Showcase in downtown New York on Thursday morning to give [Light Reading Mobile](#) some more insight into the operator's ambitions. (See [AT&T's Armada: 4G, Small Cells & More.](#))

"They're currently in my lab," Mansfield says of the combo LTE/3G/Wi-Fi small cells. AT&T defines these units as a Multi-Standard Metrocell (MSM). The operator intends for these multimode units to be deployed in public venues with indoor and outdoor versions that support up to 64 simultaneous calls.

LR Mobile asked Mansfield when the MSM units will start to move out of the lab and onto the network. "It would be foolish to think less than a year" but probably won't take two years, he said.

Metrocells that will increase voice coverage and data speeds on AT&T's HSPA+ network, which it markets as "4G", are coming much sooner. "We've got a significant portion of the country updated," Mansfield says.

AT&T defines a "Metrocell" as a "4G" unit that can be deployed in big offices or neighborhoods, with indoor and outdoor versions that can support up to 32 simultaneous calls. At the showcase event, AT&T was boasting that the metrocells have achieved nearly 100 percent outdoor coverage in Crystal Park Lake, Mo. The Crystal Park Lake area is a [Missouri Class 4 city](#) with a population of around 470 that covers an area of 64 acres. AT&T has also been testing small cells in an enterprise setting in the Milwaukee metro area and a high-rise business setting in NYC.

AT&T had an [Alcatel-Lucent](#) 9364 version 2 outdoor microcell on show at the event. Mansfield said that he is looking for both the MSM and metrocell deployments to be multivendor affairs.

Ahead of the nationwide switch-on for the HSPA+ metrocell deployment, AT&T has been working to update its data

centers and roll out updates to its mobile switching centers (MSCs) in its core network. The MSCs manage call services for phones roaming in its area.

This is necessary for the phone to work as the user would expect when roaming across the small-cell network. "If they dial 911, it better route to 911 and not somewhere else," Mansfield notes.

"That's coming pretty soon," Mansfield says of these updates.

AT&T has famously -- or maybe infamously -- said that it will deploy 40,000 small cells through the end of 2015. So, we asked Mansfield how he sees that target moving along.

"At this point I see no reason to believe that we won't hit that number ... and we could revise it next year," he said.

— Dan Jones, Site Editor, [Light Reading Mobile](#)