

TELECOM DEVELOPMENTS

Siting new telecommunications antennas is never an easy or entirely predictable proposition, whether they are placed on new, stand-alone towers or installed in existing buildings, such as church towers. Yet telecommunications towers provide access to cellular telephone service and other cellular technology, which people increasingly rely on as a core communications capability.

The tension between the need for the antennas and concerns about their health, safety and aesthetic impacts has recently been amply demonstrated in two arenas where existing towers are proving controversial.

The first surprise regarding towers already sited comes from the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), which adopted a resolution at its annual meeting in August requiring it to “oppose the use of fire stations as base stations for antennas and towers for the conduction of cell phone transmissions until such installations are proven not to be hazardous to the health of our members.” The IAFF cited international research indicating that exposure to radio frequency (RF) fields at intensities far less than levels required to produce measurable heating can cause effects in cells and tissues. The resolution indicated that firefighters experienced symptoms including migraine headaches, extreme fatigue, disorientation, slowed reaction time, vertigo, vital memory loss, and attention deficit in the first weeks cell towers and antennas were activated on or adjacent to their stations. The IAFF resolution calls for an initial U.S. and Canadian study comparing firefighters who live in stations with towers to firefighters without similar exposure.

Here in Vermont, much controversy has erupted in the last year over the location of three cell phone antennas in each of the bell towers of St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in downtown Newport City. Verizon Wireless signed a contract with the church to put cell phone antennas in the bell towers. Once the contract was signed, parishioners and neighbors objected on a number of issues. The diocese asked Verizon to be let out of the contract and Verizon declined. The City of Newport issued a zoning permit that has been appealed to the Environmental Court. The District Environmental Commission is revisiting a jurisdictional opinion in which the question is whether or not the cell antennas and equipment shed project triggers Act 250. At the same time, the Newport City zoning administrator reports, a second application for a 100-foot plus cell tower designed to hold up to four carriers was permitted locally and has not received an appeal. That cell tower was proposed to be located farther out of town, adjacent to a golf course.

Clearly appropriate location of cell towers remains a thorny issue for local governments and those people who spend a lot of time in their vicinity.

- Karen Horn, Director, VLCT Legislative and Membership Services

VLCT News, January 2005