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City Council Now Wrestling with Cell Tower Issue

By Cathy Tyson



View of the St. Anselm's bell tower from Michael Lane in Burton Valley Photo Cathy Tyson

Hoping to get their appeal upheld, a roomful of concerned neighbors stayed at a recent City Council meeting until almost midnight for a final decision on locating a T-Mobile antenna in the St. Anselm's bell tower and an associated change in design and height. Noting that, "there are a lot of moving parts to this," Mayor Carl Anduri and the rest of the City Council agreed that more information is necessary before making a decision.

The matter was continued until September 26 so that the fire department can review the proposal from a fire safety angle and additional information from T-Mobile on their coverage gap can be documented.

How did a seemingly simple matter get so complicated and contentious? This is not an entirely new concept to Burton Valley - there's already a Verizon antenna within the existing bell tower structure at St. Anselm's.

Back in March, the Planning Commission had a public hearing about using the bell tower to house a T-Mobile antenna for cell phone service. Although the commissioners generally supported the idea there were concerns about the design, so they referred the matter to the Design Review Commission (DRC) to address aesthetic concerns. The DRC made specific recommendations that included painting the whole thing a dark color to match the church, and eliminating the horizontal trim and louvers.

In June of this year the Planning Commission agreed with DRC's recommendations and approved the application - subject to certain conditions. On July 1, Don Whiteside filed an appeal on behalf of a group of neighbors who are concerned that the Planning Commission decision was based on incomplete information and that more homes should have been notified. Lafayette's policy is to mail property owners within 300 feet of the subject property a notice of the public hearing along with an outdoor posting ten days prior in the immediate area.

"We have to stop this harmful project," said Whiteside at the City Council meeting, describing the damage via visual blight, possible lowering of neighborhood real estate values and questioning T-Mobile's claims of gaps in service.

"Does the existing tower diminish property values?" asked Council Member Mike Anderson. Whiteside replied he wasn't sure.

Opponents packed the Community Hall hoping to put a kibosh on the proposed cell tower due to overall negative impacts and the proposed bigger, bulkier bell tower. If approved, the structure

portion of the existing bell tower would increase in height from 48 feet 3 inches to 56 feet.

One woman recommended "an emergency moratorium on cell towers right now." Ellen Marks, a real estate agent, reported that a World Health Organization report called cell towers "possibly carcinogenic." She feels the burden of proof is on the applicant to prove there is a significant gap in coverage.

Applicant Ann Welsh explained that T-Mobile anticipates a 700% jump in wireless data transmission by 2015 and that this technology has been in use for 160 years and can be found in baby monitors, radios, TVs and microwaves. They have produced six versions of the tower design to address aesthetic concerns and measured energy in the area from the existing tower. A licensed electrical engineer found that the current level of radio frequency energy is .023% - or 400 times below the FCC limit. He estimates that with the proposed T-Mobile antennas operating there would be 2.2% of the FCC limit - 45 times below the safety threshold.

She also explained that T-Mobile analyzed four alternative sites that didn't work for a number of reasons - lack of support by the Planning Commission, interference from trees, and more.

It will be a difficult decision one way or the other. Residents can find out for whom the bell tolls at the September 26 City Council meeting.



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