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TOWER POWER

Towns juggle demands for cell reception

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Cell phones aren't just for talking. Modern "wireless devices" are portable, personal communications hubs. They transmit old-fashioned voice calls, but are also used for e-mail, Web browsing, text messages, tweets, sports scores, weather reports, streaming video and maps that will give you directions from where you are to where you want to go, on the fly.

But a device is only as good at the network it connects to. And as wireless companies work to expand the patchy wireless coverage in the Monadnock Region, local boards are faced with the challenge of balancing the demand for an improved communications network against visual and environmental effects.

"I moved to (Fitzwilliam) because I love the town and I love the aesthetics of the area, but I can't let what I want stand in the way of what's better for the community," said Terry A. Silverman, chairman of the town's planning board.

AT&T has presented a proposal to the Fitzwilliam board to construct a 110-foot tower off Route 119.

Though Fitzwilliam has resisted proposals for cell towers in the past, times have changed, Silverman said.

"Nobody likes the way the towers look, but they want the service," he said.

He's not the only town official facing this quandary.

On Wednesday night, Stoddard's zoning board met for three hours to consider AT&T's proposal for a 150-foot tower near Granite Lake before continuing the hearing to next month, according to board secretary Patricia Putnam.

The tower has drawn the ire of some residents who say the scenic view will be destroyed and property devalued if it's allowed to be built on Melville Hill, while the company says its plans should help fill in a coverage gap on Route 9.

In early November, Alstead granted US Cellular

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permission to build a 195-foot tower on Cobb Hill, and new towers have recently appeared in Roxbury and Winchester.

Wireless companies say they're building in response to customer demand.

"The desire and appetite among our customers for increased and better service is almost insatiable," said AT&T spokesman William Keyser. "We're working very diligently and aggressively to improve our network."

Last year, AT&T invested \$18 billion in expanding its wireless and broadband networks nationwide, Keyser said. Data traffic — including text messages, e-mail, Web pages, music and videos on AT&T's network — has increased 5,000 percent in the past two years, he said.

Rival US Cellular operates 135 towers in New Hampshire and builds two or three new towers in the state each year, according to Douglas Wilk, senior project manager for the company.

US Cellular has seen an increase in community resistance to tower construction in recent years, Wilk said, particularly in scenic areas. The company tries to resolve these conflicts through the use of "stealth technology" — cell towers can be disguised as trees and hidden in church steeples, smoke stacks, fire towers and even flag poles, he said.

Federal rules; help for towns

The Federal Communications Commission has put in place special rules to make it easier for communications companies to expand their reach.

"A lot of the laws are written so that the utilities can pretty much do what they want," said Silverman, of the Fitzwilliam planning board. "We almost have to give them permits."

First, there are time limits. Under federal rules, towns have a maximum of 150 days to consider an application for a new tower and 90 days to consider an addition to an existing tower, or to an antenna hidden in a church steeple or on the top of a building, or any other addition to a structure that already exists.

And then, under the 1996 Federal Communications Act, local governments face getting sued if they make it impossible for a company to provide coverage in their area. This means that to turn down an application, a board has to prove — in writing — that the company could install another tower or set of towers elsewhere to cover the same area.

"Local zoning decisions have to walk that tightrope between following the zoning regulations and not effectively prohibiting wireless service," said David Maxson, who runs the Massachusetts-based consulting company Broadcast Signal Lab.

Maxson's job is to help local boards deal with the extra time pressure and extra rules that come along with applications for cell towers and other wireless facilities. And even though he works for local governments to review applications from companies like AT&T and US Cellular, under state law, he said, the companies pick up the tab.

Even though towns can't stop AT&T or US Cellular or any other provider from coming into town, there are things they can do to make sure their residents get the best service possible with the fewest negative effects.

"Sometimes a carrier is really trying to get the maximum performance from one facility, and sometimes it



really does pay to split the difference," Maxson said. "Instead of one big ugly tower on the top of a hill, you can have one down in the woods and one over by the bend in the river ... sometimes multiple small towers give more coverage and better coverage."

Maxson recommends local governments plan ahead to pick a consultant they would like to work with before a wireless facility application lands on their desks.

In addition, he said, not all zoning ordinances are created equal. If a town's rules for wireless facilities are worded as if all facilities are giant towers, that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Zoning rules and setback limits can rule out other potential options, such as placing antennas in church steeples.

"If there's a willing church and a willing cell company, it's perfect," Maxson said.

He recommends towns take a close look at their ordinances and make sure they're setting rules for the kind of development they'd most like to see.

"There are corners that towns paint themselves into."

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