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Santa Cruz K-5 closes citing cell tower radiation

By ROGER SIDEMAN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — A new Westside elementary school is closing its doors following plans by First Congregational Church to install three cell-phone transmitters next door atop its 80-foot steeple.

Una Familia, the private school at 900 High St. that serves 25 kindergarten through fifth-grade students at 900 High St., has a stated mission of incorporating neuroscience into its curriculum. It's an emphasis that school founder Joan Harrington, who rents the space from the church, says is inherently incompatible with a business deal she says would bathe the neighborhood in electromagnetic radiation.

"This has ruined my business because the families that come to me were coming to be part of this special program," said Harrington, who taught at Bonny Doon School for 20 years before opening Una Familia on the old Pacific Collegiate site in January. "It makes absolutely no sense for me to go forward with my research."

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Part of the school's so-called "brain-based" educational model looks at how ambient radiation impairs student performance and intensifies student distractibility.

Cell phone companies have long maintained that there isn't any clear evidence that cellular towers pose any health risks. In the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress banned local governments from blocking towers on safety grounds.

First Congregational Church's senior minister Dave Grishaw-Jones said he's heartbroken by the situation with the elementary school.

"We believe Jean's mission at the school fit our values as a progressive church," Grishaw-Jones said. "If our leadership felt the science was clear, we'd back off in a flash. Science is used in different ways, and we thought it's best not to be intimidated."

Built in the late 1950s, the church's steeple is now in disrepair and needs to be stabilized, Grishaw-Jones said. A financial deal initiated by cell provider Sprint will allow the church to keep the steeple, he said.

Raising funds to fix the steeple is one thing, local activists contend, but doing it by building a cell transmitter to benefit a private enterprise is another.

Though the new transmitters are intended to smooth out patchy phone service in the area — a frequent complaint of UC Santa Cruz staff and students nearby — Harrington and other opponents view them as nothing less than an affront to human health and the democratic process.

"It's a usurpation of our rights to choose the hazards we want or don't want to be exposed to," said Deborah Salisbury of the Alliance for Wireless Hazard Protection based in Live Oak.

Parent Annemarie Bertschi had two children enrolled in art classes at Una Familia.

"I've looked at some of the data around cell towers and a 1,000 foot buffer would be more reasonable; this is way too close," she said.

But apparently there's already a smaller cell tower much closer to the school, hidden inside a fake chimney on the church roof; it's been there since 1999. Harrington said she learned about it just five weeks ago, adding that the existing tower was also a factor in her decision to close the school.

The federal ban that prevents local governments from using health concerns as a factor in regulating cellular towers hasn't stopped some area governments. Some have called for moratoriums on tower building, and places like Gilroy have passed local laws to restrict the size,

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shape and location of future cell sites.

No moratorium exists in Santa Cruz, but the proposal by First Congressional Church still requires the City Council's approval, Grishaw-Jones said.

Last month, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it will review wireless phone safety following a recently published study that raised concerns about a heightened risk of brain cancer. The agency continues to monitor studies for possible health problems stemming from long-term exposure to radio frequency energy.

Earlier this year in Monterey, the city approved plans to install three cell phone towers disguised inside three specially constructed fiberglass crosses to be mounted atop St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church. Elsewhere in the region, companies have begun disguising cell towers inside faux pine trees, water towers and billboards.

Contact Roger Sidemanat
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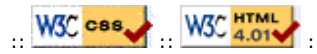
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