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Cell-Phone Tower Debate Grows

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ST. LOUIS -- After two years of boisterous meetings and litigation, the 150-member Southampton Presbyterian Church surrounded by closely-spaced red-brick homes is at odds with its neighbors over an issue that has nothing to do with theology.

T-Mobile plans to construct a cell phone antenna along the chimney of the two-story, 89-year-old white-stone building. In return, the company will pay rent to the church.

"That revenue is in exchange for our potential well-being, our peace of mind and our property values," said David O'Brien, 33, who lives two homes down and remains unconvinced by studies downplaying the health threat of low-level radio-frequency emissions.

"None of us are willing to take that risk," O'Brien said. "None of us are going to put our kids in a bedroom that's 70 feet away from something that might cause cancer or other problems."

In years past, cell towers and antennas stood anonymously in farm fields, on remote hilltops, on water towers. As cell phone use continues to grow, companies must find new places to keep up with demand -- including residential areas like the South Hampton neighborhood.

Ten years ago, the U.S. had 24 million cell phone subscribers, said Joe Farren, a spokesman for CTIA-The Wireless Association, the trade group for the industry. Today, more than 190 million cell phones are in use.

To keep up, cell "sites" -- towers and antennas mostly -- have increased tenfold, from fewer than 18,000 in 1994 to more than 175,000 now. Without additional towers, calls are lost and reception suffers.

"Our companies are always running into this conundrum, which is, 'We want cell phone service, but don't put that tower here,'" Farren said. "When you're dealing with communications through the air, you have to have antennas and towers."

To meet demand, companies are increasingly turning to nontraditional sites -- fire houses, churches, schools, even cemeteries and national parks. A cell tower now sits near Yellowstone's Old Faithful, despite strong opposition.

Opposition is just as strong in residential areas. Washington attorney Ed Donohue, who represents several cell phone companies, estimated that more than 500 cases have been heard nationwide involving efforts to stop cell phone towers and antennas. In most cases, the cell phone companies have won.

That's in part because federal law eliminates one of the key arguments against cell sites -- the health factor. No studies have shown conclusive evidence that radio-frequency emissions are harmful at levels allowed by the Federal Communications Commission. As a result, the law prohibits rejection of a tower based on health risk.

Yet fear of the uncertainty remains. A year ago, the International Association of Fire Fighters opposed the use of fire houses for cell sites "until a study with the highest scientific merit" proves they are safe.

The American Cancer Society's website says that because the technology is still relatively new, "we do not

yet have full information on health effects." However, the organization noted there was no known evidence of a link between low-level emissions and cancer.

Still, the perception of a health risk, combined with what some consider an eyesore, can lower property values for those living near a cell site, O'Brien said.

Cell sites can be a financial boon to those who provide space for them. Cell companies won't discuss rent, but Donohue said companies typically pay \$800 to \$2,000 per month, depending on location, the size of the tower or antenna, and other factors. That can be a significant amount for a struggling school district or a church with stagnant or declining membership.

Residents of St. Louis' South Hampton neighborhood first learned of Southampton Presbyterian's plan to rent space to T-Mobile in 2003. Immediately, they mobilized against it. A petition opposing the cell antenna was signed by more than 250 people.

When talks failed, residents turned to zoning officials who ruled against T-Mobile. The city's Board of Adjustment agreed, ruling the antenna could have "a negative impact on the health of children and residents" and would cause property values to decrease.

T-Mobile sued. U.S. Magistrate Judge Frederick Buckles ruled in favor of the company in July. Debbie Barrett, a spokeswoman for suburban Seattle-based T-Mobile, said the company is doing everything it can to make the site blend in. But she said the antenna is needed.

"We have a responsibility not only to our customers but to the public agencies that benefit from our 911 service," Barrett said.

Southampton's pastor, Will Mason, said the antenna will not extend beyond the top of the chimney, will sit flush against it, will even be painted the same shade of white as the chimney. Neither he nor T-Mobile would disclose the rental fee.

Mason said he spent months studying health effects of cell sites, the impact on property values. He believes the antenna is harmless.

"It wasn't all that kindly to be demonized, but we're over it," Mason said. "We've tried to work with the neighborhood association and the folks opposed to the antenna."

Still, O'Brien said neighbors feel betrayed. Parishioners on Sunday morning used to be met with a smile and a wave from neighbors. Now, he said, they're met with angry glares.

"Almost every one of my neighbors says they're going to move if this thing goes up," O'Brien said.

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