

Cell tower proposal draws noise concerns from York neighbors

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YORK, Maine — The York Water District is considering a proposal to add a cell tower atop the Roots Rock Road water tank in the middle of a York Heights neighborhood, stirring hopes of better cellular service as well as concerns from property owners.

The water district held an online informational session last week, with presentations about the proposed installation and an opportunity for community members to voice their concerns about noise, radiation and potential impacts on property values.

David Walsh of Smart Link, an AT&T consultant, said the six panel antennas proposed will address “dead zones” and gaps in coverage for more than 1,400 AT&T customers in York, as well as provide enhancements to the FirstNet system, a public safety communications platform designed to support public safety agencies and first responders.

Walsh said three other locations in town were considered and rejected. Two locations at York Hospital were not feasible, and one location at the First Parish Congregational Church was rejected due to the historical nature of the steeple.

“Water tanks make great locations (for cell antennas) due to their height and because they are structurally sound,” Walsh said.

The installation would include a propane-fueled emergency backup generator near the southeast corner of the Water District lot, with a sound-dampening enclosure. To assure its readiness during power outages, the generator will run during scheduled testing and to top off the batteries to 80%, Walsh said.

The antenna display is not readily visible from the ground due to the height of the tank, which stands 65 feet tall, Walsh said. By wrapping the antenna with a tape that reflects the sky color, “the antenna will almost disappear,” he said.

Anticipating questions regarding the noise level from the generator, Walsh said testing showed the average decibel level to be about 55 dBA, or slightly less than the sound of a typical conversation or a toilet flushing.

Walsh also mentioned that the generator will produce noise well within the limits of the York Noise Ordinance, which sets absolute limits between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. of 70 decibels in the Route One-4 and BUS-3 zoning districts and 60 decibels in all other zones. Walsh said the limit is 50 decibels at all other hours, except in the case of emergencies, and he said he does not expect the generator to be scheduled to run during those hours.

Donald Haes Jr., a certified health physicist, addressed concerns regarding radiation safety, concluding that AT&T's proposal would remain well below the FCC's limits 24/7 exposure.

A number of York Heights residents spoke also regarding their concerns.

Wendy Roberts, who lives about 500 feet away from the water tank, on nearby Avon Avenue, raised a concern that a number of residents she spoke to were unaware of the informational session, despite the notices that were distributed.

Roberts also said it appears that only AT&T customers will benefit from the proposed installation, while the possible negative effects, including aesthetics and radiation, will affect all residents of her York Heights neighborhood.

"This is a very, very quiet neighborhood, despite the fact that it is in the middle of town. We listen to owls at night. It is silent, and we can actually hear something that is on the York Hospital roof, just to give you a sense of how quiet it is," said Roberts.

Kathryn Mulhearn, of Fernald Avenue, which also abuts the water tank, asked how much money York Water District stands to gain by this AT&T proposal. Superintendent Don Neumann said the contract would likely result in a \$35,000 annual payment, which is a very small portion of the district's operating budget.

A number of residents questioned whether the proposed installation will adversely impact property values. While there was no authoritative answer to that question, one panelist suggested that having good cell service would only enhance property values.

Two residents spoke positively of the benefits of better cell reception, but were concerned that only AT&T customers would benefit.

Richard Hennessey, of Ferncroft Road, spoke of York residents having “suffered long-term with really poor cellphone service,” adding that “it is unfortunate that this site appears to be for one carrier.”

The next step in the process, Neumann said, will be at the district’s Sept. 16 trustees meeting, when they will consider the AT&T proposal. Interested parties can stay informed by checking the YWD website at www.yorkwaterdistrict.org for updates and FAQs.

Link: <https://www.seacoastonline.com/news/20200907/cell-tower-proposal-draws-noise-concerns-from-york-neighbors>