

We love our cellphones, just not their towers

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Cellphones represent an interesting conundrum in York Region and in many communities. We all love the technology — the ability to connect wherever we are at any time — but we sure do seem to hate the infrastructure, such as towers, that makes it possible.

A quick search of any news website will reveal numerous examples of towns, cities and citizens fighting against the siting of cell towers in their vicinities. To be sure, there have been a number of examples of this phenomenon in York Region.

Last spring, a group of Aurora residents rallied against a 60-metre tower being erected within view of their homes near Bathurst and Wellington streets, just a stone's throw west of the town's boundary with King Township. In their opposition to the Bell tower, residents cited concerns of diminished property values, a marring of community aesthetics and a lack of notification.

Issues pertaining to potential negative health effects were also raised.

A couple of months earlier, in February 2013, King Mayor Steve Pellegrini and councillors made it clear they weren't thrilled at the prospect of having a tower built in their municipality predominantly to serve neighbouring communities. King council made its position known to Industry Canada, but there was just one resident present at the council meeting to object to the tower owing largely to the sparsely-populated nature of the area surrounding the tower site.

King had hosted a public consultation meeting in August 2012 and asked Bell to notify residents within 250 metres of the site. It's not clear how many King residents were alerted to the plan, but it seems just 10 on the Aurora side of the border were given a heads up.

Aurora's input was also sought, but the town declined to comment.

Fast forward to last spring and perturbed residents packed the council chamber to demand action from their municipal representatives. Aurora council initially agreed to pursue an injunction against the tower, but legal opinions obtained indicated that pursuing such a legal avenue could be costly, up to \$100,000 and prove, ultimately, fruitless.

Instead, the town opted to go through Industry Canada's dispute resolution process in an effort to call on the body to implement higher public consultation requirements rather than try to topple the tower in question. Aurora CAO Neil Garbe later apologized on behalf of the town and an unidentified town employee who turned down an opportunity to comment on behalf of the town.

Another Bell cell tower eyed for the corner of Bayview and 16th avenues in Richmond Hill raised the ire of residents and council members in that community last March and talk of new towers has elicited a chilly response from residents and municipal councillors in various municipalities. The list just goes on and on.

Earlier this year, Industry Canada introduced changes to its cell tower placement policy intended to ensure municipalities and residents can play a more active role in the process. The new rules require cell providers to consider utilizing existing structures before pursuing a tower, contact all local stakeholders who may have an interest in any new towers, seek comment from impacted homeowners and report any input received to Industry Canada, among other rules.

In addition, if an impasse should occur between a municipality and a company, Industry Canada will get involved and either refer the parties to mediation or look closely at the facts and issue a decision. Such instances are rare, according

to Industry Canada, which suggests it gets involved in fewer than 0.1 per cent of cases.

Beyond those measures, the federal government will also launch a new outreach plan this summer aimed at better guiding residents, municipalities and companies through the tower placement process. This will include new online resources, a function to track tower issues and increased communication with residents most affected.

Despite the new rules in place, not all goes smoothly on this issue. Whitchurch-Stouffville council raised eyebrows last month by receiving a staff report about a new Rogers cell tower proposed for 20 Freel Lane in the community's downtown.

Conservative Oak Ridges-Markham MP Paul Calandra is one of those disappointed by the town's lack of comment, especially with the new Industry Canada rules in place. The changes put a lot of power in the hands of municipalities, he said, adding he's not certain why the town felt it had no say in the matter and opted not to comment, especially when the law says otherwise.

"That's a rather unfortunate interpretation," he said of council's position. "I'm at a loss."

Rogers, as with other cell providers, is a good corporate citizen and often listens to the concerns of any citizens who come forward, Mr. Calandra said.

Three years ago, residents packed the Stouffville council chamber over a tower eyed for St. John's Sideroad. Despite meeting the town's consultation requirements, the town voted against the tower and it was never built.

Mayor Wayne Emmerson, along with Andrew McNeely, the town's director of planning and building services, as well as acting CAO, do not know why there is so much backlash to this application now.

"I wish I knew why MP Calandra would not have called me, texted me or emailed

on the weekend before our (March 18) meeting if he had so many issues with the tower. We could have referred the motion, which was a receiving motion, to our next meeting to allow him and other residents time to speak to us. We do that with all residents if more time is needed on any issue ...," the mayor told The Sun-Tribune via email last month.

Concerned about the impact of the tower both on residents and the efforts to revitalize the downtown, Mr. Calandra intends to hold a public meeting of his own at the Stouffville Creek Retirement Residence, not far from the tower site, April 5 between 2 and 4 p.m.

— with files from Sandra Bolan

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far from the controversial proposed tower site in downtown Stouffville, Saturday between 2 and 4 p.m.

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