

Freel Lane cell tower plan dead? It all depends who you ask

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Phil Bannon is surprised and disappointed how the Freel Lane downtown Stouffville cell tower issue has evolved during the past few weeks.

In a special council meeting yesterday, the Ward 2 councillor asked Oak Ridges-Markham MP Paul Calandra to "drop his swords and work with Whitchurch-Stouffville and work with the community".

"Let's join forces," he said.

Mr. Calandra contends, in an April 7 media release, Rogers has "... chosen not to proceed with their application for this tower in this location, acknowledging that the historic downtown Stouffville is not the right location."

He reiterated that claim in an e-mail communication to Mayor Wayne Emmerson and all six councillors late Tuesday night.

"...I have been in contact with Rogers Communications who have confirmed to me that they will not be proceeding with this tower at this location at this time," it reads in part.

This information is news to Rogers' representatives who attended the hastily called council meeting.

"We would like to work with the town on alternative locations," Tatyana Moro, municipal relations specialist, told councillors yesterday.

When asked last week by The Sun-Tribune to confirm Rogers is no longer considering Freel Lane as an option, Jennifer Kent, senior manager of media relations for Rogers Communications replied via e-mail: "We're looking at all options and are working with the federal and municipal levels of government to address concerns raised by the public, while at the same time fulfilling our commitment to improving wireless services for our customers."

The tower is in response to Rogers' assessment of an area within Whitchurch-Stouffville and the surrounding area where coverage deficiencies exist, specifically within the downtown core area of Main Street and O'Brien Avenue, according to the March 18 council report.

Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville staff and Rogers' representatives will continue to work on finding a suitable location, according to Mr. Emmerson.

"No cell towers in anywhere downtown Stouffville is not the right answer," stated Councillor Clyde Smith during yesterday morning's meeting, which was attended by, among others, two Rogers' representatives, a member of Mr. Calandra's staff and Denise Kata, manager of the neighbouring Stouffville Creek Retirement Residence.

"The quality of service in this town is not what it needs to be," Mr. Smith said.

Michael Larkin, who owns 20 Freel Lane and the neighbouring Earl of Whitchurch pub is "quite surprised about the kerfuffle" surrounding the cell tower's location. Rogers representatives approached the Mount Joy Investments president about a year ago.

"There's nothing we can do if they don't take the site," he said.

A recent report cited by Councillor Rob Hargrave claimed more people are abandoning their landlines for cell phones.

"People are getting rid of their home phones and it would be tragic if someone couldn't call 911 because of that," said Councillor Richard Bartley.

Among the resolutions passed by council Wednesday morning was one to have staff look at how residents are notified of cell tower and other planning applications.

Currently, residents and businesses within a 150-metre radius of the proposed amendment site receive written notification. There are also notices placed with local newspapers.

"Even Paul Calandra's staff missed this totally," noted Councillor Susanne Hilton.

The MP's Main Street office is 400 metres away from

the Freel Lane site.

"It's a good example of what the problem is with the written word. People just don't take the time to read," Ms Hilton said of people throwing out mailed notices and not reading newspapers.

'We do what we do according to the planning code but it's probably not enough.'

The town also posted a notice on the site regarding the application and January meeting.

Mr. Emmerson apologized for not sending information about the January consultation meeting to Mr. Calandra's office, but they were going on the assumption the municipality was "only a commenting agency".

Mr. Emmerson noted Rogers, along with town staff, followed municipal policy.

"We do what we do according to the planning code but it's probably not enough," he said.

Because it appears the role of a municipality, when it comes to cell tower applications is now unclear, the mayor wants to hold a public meeting with representatives from Industry Canada in June.

He also wants people from Health Canada, the York Region health department, all telecommunication providers and both the MP and MPP to be a part of the meeting.

"Will they come? It's hard to say. ... Finally I want to get to the bottom of this," he said.

RESIDENTS, MP SAY NO TO TOWER

Saturday's hastily organized, albeit well publicized, public meeting concerning the installation of a Rogers cell tower in the centre of Stouffville didn't start out well for Oak Ridges-Markham MP Paul Calandra.

Originally slated for a meeting room in neighbouring Stouffville Creek Retirement Residence, the erstwhile hosts feared a possible flu outbreak might jeopardize visitors' health.

The forum was moved to the smaller waiting room of the town's GO station.

Shoulder to shoulder, the mystified and miffed waited, wanting to know how a tawdry 30-metre cell tower in the centre of the town they so anxiously want to revitalize received Whitchurch-Stouffville council approval, seemingly under the public radar.

After handing out bottled water and copies of a plan on how the MP intends to re-visit the issue with town council and Rogers, a petition for signatures and two hours of lively constituent commentary, the relief in the over-heated little train station was palpable.

Mr. Calandra's briefing reiterated the processes leading to the meeting, the apparent lack of public consultation and the ambiguities relating to how a cell tower gets approved.

"It's strange, no comment from a municipal council means 'yes' to the federal government," he said. "When that happens, power is taken out of our hands."

Assuring the gathering he's not in the habit of meddling with local council, he felt prompted to step in, after he, like most

residents, was unaware the nine-storey cell tower was approved in principle.

"As of right now, Rogers could start building the tower tomorrow," he said.

Allaying fears, he advised he's been working with Rogers to discuss alternative locations, hinting the matter might be deferred until technology affords a smaller, less intrusive tower outside the town core that still delivers strong reception. The stack of petitions, letters and emails he's received from local opponents to the tower will accompany his request that council "immediately hold an emergency meeting to reconsider their position on the proposed Rogers Communications cell tower ... taking into account all public comment."

"Today is your opportunity to voice opinion," he said.

"No," was the resounding chorus in reply to Mr. Calandra asking whether the attendees wanted a tower in the midst of the historic town.

Mr. Calandra was preaching to the choir.

"There's no reason to put a tower in the middle of our heritage district," said one man.

"We had no idea what was going on until we heard from you, our MP," said a woman.

However, the 11th-hour intervention by the MP isn't sitting well with Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Wayne Emmerson.

"He's calling on me to take down every tower in town," Mr. Calandra said. "I'll let you decide if that's a mature response."

- Chris Traber

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