



The Times

Tower battle in works

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Staff Writer

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP - A mobile phone company's plan to replace a cell tower on New Road with a much taller one has drawn the ire of neighbors, who have hired an attorney to stop the project.

Objectors, who have formed Residents Opposed to Cellular (ROTC), say there are better township locations for the 180-foot tower Cingular Wireless wants to erect. The existing one is 150 feet tall. Residents claim putting the higher tower in their neighborhood of large, country homes would ruin their quality of life.

"This is a huge issue for us," said New Road resident Peter Zakia. "They are, in essence, taking a very quiet, peaceful area and making it a commercial property," since the existing tower is reserved for police use only and sits on a residential-zoned plot.

Cingular Wireless has applied for township permission to locate the replacement cell tower near the intersection of New Road and Harbourton-Woodsville Road.

The residential property includes an unoccupied house. The existing tower there holds police communication equipment. The replacement tower would house Cingular's equipment, police equipment and the equipment of other wireless companies that want to locate there.

The project requires a zoning variance because local laws prohibit cell phone towers in that area. The police tower is considered a pre-existing, non-conforming use. Replacing it with the cell phone tower constitutes a use change, township officials have said.

Township zoning officer Robert Miller said erecting Cingular's cell tower on the New Road site makes sense because the police communications tower is already there.

"Some of the first places the township should look when considering a new tower are the sites where current towers exist," Miller said.

But residents say it would present a host of problems for them.

Not the least of which, they said, is that Cingular's tower would be open for other wireless carriers to use.

They said each carrier that uses the tower will need to house a backup generator on the site.

"There will be a bunch of noisy generators on that property and no one will ever live there again," said Zakia. "They're opening up Pandora's box with this application."

Stuart J. Lieberman, the attorney hired to represent ROTC, said he will argue that the proposed replacement cell tower does not meet the criteria for a use variance.

"The site is not particularly suited for this use," Lieberman said. "There are other sites they should be considering. This one is in the middle of a residential neighborhood. It's going to really tower over the landscape of the entire community."

Residents said a commercial property on Poor Farm Road, owned by Trap Rock Industries, would make a more suitable site for Cingular's tower. They said the site is higher, would provide better reception and is not in a residential area. The police department could move its equipment there, they said.

Police have said they don't care where their communications equipment goes, only that it be placed at a higher elevation to boost radio coverage, which is spotty in hilly areas.

A 2003 report commissioned by the township recommended a new tower be erected on Poor Farm Road to address gaps in commercial mobile phone service and police radio service. But the same report also advised that new cell phone equipment be placed on existing towers to cut down on the number of towers in the township.

"What we have here is (an) existing tower structure staring us in the face," Miller said. "If they put one on Poor Farm Road, that would make two towers instead of one."

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