

Cellular phone tower debate continues

■ Two opponents urge the owner of a proposed tower site to reconsider renting the property to Verizon Wireless

By Kara Cogswell
Oregon Daily Emerald

As the battle continues regarding where and whether cellular phone towers belong within city limits, University students may soon find themselves very close to the center of the storm.

Last week, a Eugene hearings official surprised many when she reversed an earlier recommendation by Eugene Planning Director Jan Childs to bar Verizon Wireless from building an 80-foot cellular phone tower on Franklin Boulevard.

"We were shocked," said Don Knight, a local businessman who owns property near the site. "We were 90 percent sure it was going to be turned down."

The proposed Verizon site is in the parking lot of the Travelodge Motel, located on Garden Avenue, a side street of Franklin Boulevard just opposite the University.

Even closer to campus, Sprint is still looking into erecting a tower near the intersection of 15th Avenue and Villard Street, adjacent to the new law school housing complex and less than a block away from the Bean residence hall.

Earlier this year, Sprint contacted the city about a proposal to build a 120-foot tower on the site, but the cellular phone company has not yet submitted an application to build the tower, said Shawna Adams-Jacobs, a city planner.

In July, a spokesman for Sprint said the company was waiting to see what the outcome would be in the Verizon decision before filing an application, because of a city zoning ordinance that requires 2000 feet separating cellular phone towers.

Now that a decision has been reached, Sprint spokesman Dave Mellin confirmed the cellular phone company still hopes to build a tower on the Villard site.

"We are going to go ahead and move forward with the zoning process," he said.

The application process will be more difficult for Sprint if the Verizon approval is upheld, Adams-Jacobs said, because Sprint will need to submit an application for a variance to the zoning ordinance in addition to an application for a land use permit. Variance criteria are generally hard to meet, she added.

Near the Verizon site, there are a number of homes and small businesses that would fall within 200 feet of the tower. Many of those who live and work there are protesting the proposal.

Knight, who owns Onsen, a hot tub rental company on Garden Av-

enue, and Daphne Ruff, who owns the property nearby, have been among the most outspoken of the neighborhood critics.

Earlier this week, the two sent a letter to Ted Braatz, the owner of the Barron's Travelodge, asking him to change his mind about renting the property to Verizon, Knight said.

He is optimistic that Braatz will back out of the deal under pressure from his neighbors, he said, but in case he does not, they also plan to file an appeal with the state Land Use Board of Appeals.

Knight argues that the tower will detract from the appearance of the neighborhood and will devalue his property.

Other opponents of the proposal argue that cellular phone towers pose possible health risks. But there is no conclusive evidence to support those claims.

Regardless of the outcome of the appeal on the Verizon decision, there is likely to be opposition to the Sprint tower if that application is approved as well.

Zach Vishanoff, a community activist who has been publicizing Sprint's interest in the site for months, said he expects that if the company representatives try to build the tower when the majority of students are in town, they will face strong opposition to their plans.

"The Villard site has very little

chance of going up," he said. "I think you can count on two or three times as much opposition" as to the Verizon proposal.

But according to the cellular phone companies, heavy use of cell phones by University students is part of the reason why new towers are necessary.

Verizon has said it wants to build the tower to improve digital wireless services on campus.

And Mellin said Sprint is also looking to build the tower because of user demands. The area surrounding the Villard lot is considered a "capacity site," he said, meaning wireless phones are used heavily in the area.

Because building a cellular phone tower is an expensive and time-consuming process, "it's not something that's taken lightly," he said.

As of now, there are two cell towers located on campus — one belonging to Qwest and one belonging to Voicestream Wireless — on the top of Prince Lucien Campbell Hall, said Dave Barta, the manager of University Telecom Services.

Despite requests from many cellular phone companies, the University has no plans to put up another tower on PLC, Barta said. And, he added, he has not received any indication that cellular phone coverage on campus is inadequate. The cellular phone companies, he said, are trying to anticipate the future needs of the campus rather than the existing ones.

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