

NEWS



ON JUNE 19, THE PEACE AND DIGNITY INDIGENOUS RUNNERS STOPPED BY THE LONGHOUSE AT LANE COMMUNITY COLLEGE ON THEIR JOURNEY TO PANAMA CITY, PANAMA. THEY WERE GREETED BY LOCAL NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND A POTLUCK DINNER. THE RUN IS PART OF THE 'PROPHESY OF THE EAGLE AND THE CONDOR' THAT CALLS TO REUNITE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE IN A 'SPIRITUAL WAY IN ORDER TO HEAL OUR NATIONS SO WE CAN BEGIN TO WORK TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE FOR OUR CHILDREN AND GENERATIONS TO COME.'

PHOTO: ATHENA DELENE

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BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

CHURCHES ARE THE NEW HOMES FOR CELL TOWERS

When Kate Sullivan got the postcard last month notifying her of a proposal to place a cell phone tower at the church near her Jefferson Westside Neighborhood home, she was concerned.

"It's going to be in our backyard," she remembers thinking.

Sullivan says she almost missed seeing that card notifying her of the proposal to place a Verizon cell phone tower on the Bethel Temple on W. 18th Avenue near Chambers Street, explaining that she either never saw it or never got the first postcard that was sent out in April about the cell tower proposal. She and other neighbors swung into action and filed an appeal with the city, squeaking it in before the 5 pm June 6 deadline.

Verizon swiftly withdrew its proposal, but Sullivan says she is concerned that this is the harbinger of future cell tower proposals at churches in her neighborhood and in residential areas around the city.

"If you see declining enrollment at a church in your neighborhood," Sullivan warns, neighbors should watch out. Such towers may soon blanket the city as cell companies compete to provide users with streaming coverage, she says.

Sullivan and other members of The Westside Neighbors for Responsible Cell Tower Placement want to see upcoming changes in city code with regard to cell phone tower placement reflect the health, safety and livability concerns of Eugene residents.

Alissa Hansen, principal planner with the city of Eugene, affirms that when it comes to land use applications, "the last several towers we've seen were on churches." Churches often have large properties, which meet setback requirements, she says.

There is a plethora of internet sites devoted to helping churches with cell tower deals, their regulations and tax issues.

And the leases can be lucrative. In 2015, Crossfire Ministries asked for \$750,000 to drop a long-term lease with AT&T for a cell tower in south Eugene, saying that was half the value of the lease. After a community outcry, AT&T withdrew its proposal.

Hansen says the city is indeed revising its regulations but cautions that city code has to comply with federal regulations and "can't say, 'No cell towers in all areas.'" The city can, however, "look at other standards and tighten requirements."

Cell companies will fight towns that seek tighter regulations. In May, Verizon filed a lawsuit against the small city of Capitola near Monterey Bay, California, over the city's cell phone tower regulations, arguing in its complaint that "the ordinance is so restrictive that it effectively bars new wireless facilities in most of the city, even if they have no significant visual or other impacts."

In its appeal against the proposed Bethel Temple cell tower, the Westside Neighbors group's arguments included that the city failed to provide information that allowed for public participation, that the original April 28 notice was "incorrect, incomplete, misleading and inadequate" and that the April notice and the May 23 notice were possibly not in compliance with city code.

Hansen says that back in November 2015, the city of Eugene initiated changes to "land use code to provide more protection in residential areas but still comply with federal regulations. She says when the City Council gave its direction, it "was very specific," but at the time the collocation of towers with existing structures, such as church steeples, were not an issue. She says that through the public process, issues such as collocation should be brought up as the code changes are discussed.

According to a February city Planning Commission meeting discussing the proposed changes, the specific changes were as follows: to prohibit cell towers in residential zones except through a process, such as a variance, as required to comply with federal law; tighten application requirements and approval criteria to better address a significant gap in service; include a requirement that all applications for new cell towers include an alternative configuration analysis; and adjust height limits to clearly prohibit heights greater than necessary to fill the identified service gap.

The most telling of the Westside Neighbors' arguments focused on the issue of collocation and granting a variance for the proposed cell tower. Verizon wanted to put its tower on the church's steeple. But such a steeple, the group argued, didn't actually yet exist.

Sullivan says that city code allows for setbacks, third party evaluations and other restrictions for new towers, but for collocated towers granted a variance, "all that goes away."

In the Bethel Temple proposal, Sullivan says she was concerned about possible noise from the fans associated with the proposed cell tower as well as possible health effects, which she says are not addressed in the 30-year-old science used in the 1996 federal Telecommunications Act.

According to the American Cancer Society, "Very few human studies have focused specifically on cellular phone towers and cancer risk." And the group says that results of a study on rats by the U.S. National Toxicology Program "found increased (although still low) risks of brain and heart tumors in male rats exposed to RF [radiofrequency] radiation."

Sullivan likens the possible health effects of cell phone and tower exposure to the era in which the cancer-causing effects of smoking were not known.

Hansen says of the proposed changes to city code on cell towers: "We're hopeful that we will be able to start the process in the next couple of months" and make the proposed regulations "widely available to interested parties and service providers" and get as much public input as possible. ■

A letter to the city from the Westside Neighbors on the cell tower issue can be found at the group's Facebook page at facebook.com/WestsideNeighborsforResponsibleCellTowerPlacement.