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APA Looks to Ease Burden on Cell Carriers, Redefine Co-Location

Following a hearing last week with cellular service providers and area officials, Adirondack Park Agency staff intends to propose a new definition of co-location to commissioners in the near future.

The aim of the proposed change in definition is to reduce the cost burden on cellular providers while maintaining the agency mandate to protect the aesthetic nature of the park.

APA spokesman Keith McKeever said Wednesday staff will alter the agency's definition of co-location to include two separate towers on the same site.

McKeever said if commissioners approve the policy shift, the company building the second tower on the parcel could avoid the costly process of full-review and be granted a general permit.

"There is only a 15-day turnaround on general permits," McKeever said.

Full agency reviews require several site visits by agency staff and hours of computer modeling. A full review can take several months before it reaches the APA board for approval.

If adopted, the agency would refer to adjacent towers as "horizontal co-location."

Verizon and AT&T Wireless officials reported that the cost of constructing a single cell tower in the park is twice the cost of building one elsewhere.

Historically, co-location was specifically used to describe two separate cellular arrays on the same tower. But the APA would prefer to keep towers as low as functionally possible while still providing cell coverage throughout the most densely populated and highly-traveled areas of the region.

State Senator Betty Little and the Adirondack Council have recently renewed calls to allow for taller towers that would allow single-structure co-location while limiting vegetative clearing and service road construction

"It just makes more ecological sense to me that we build a single tower and put more carriers on it," Little recently told WNBZ.

Officials from the town of Duane have complained that the recently-constructed 65-foot cell tower on the campus of Paul Smith's College is not providing the radius of service they'd anticipated. The tower was proposed to be 90 feet, but was reduced to 65 during agency review.

McKeever said information suggests the amount of users on the single array may be reducing the tower's service area, especially when students are on campus.

But Verizon Wireless Northeast spokesman John O'Malley told WNBZ that the most significant determining factor in a tower's coverage area is its height.

"A taller tower lets us cover a broader area," O'Malley said. "If by number of users you mean the number of customers using a site at any one time, that wouldn't affect service very significantly."

In 2009, the APA approved permits for 14 new towers and 14 single-tower co-locations. The agency also approved three projects that would be considered horizontal co-locations.

The agency's towers policy – which applies to any proposed project greater than 40 feet in height – requires that a project be "substantially invisible" from well-traveled and public areas.

"The substantial invisibility standard does limit our ability to design sites with the potential for co-location because sites within the Park can only be slightly taller than the prevailing tree height where they are located, leaving us room for only our equipment," O'Malley said.

-Jon Alexander, 2-8-10