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Mobile surge in remote areas

Number of cell towers has increased in the Adirondacks in the last three years

By BRIAN NEARING Staff writer

There has been a building binge going on in the Adirondacks. It is not of luxury second homes, but of something much less visible -- unless you are looking for bars showing coverage on a mobile telephone.

Two new mobile telephone signal towers now being built along the Route 28 corridor are part of a doubling of towers or antennas in the Adirondack Park during the last three years.

The towers in Wevertown and The Glen, along Route 28 in northern Warren County, are among 74 permits issued by the Adirondack Park Agency for new, replacement or enhanced existing towers from 2008 to early May, according to agency records.

In contrast, from 1973, when the APA was created, to early 2008 -- a stretch of 35 years -- there were 74 such permits issued.

Expanded mobile coverage in the six million-acre Adirondacks, which is the most remote and rugged part of the state, has long been a goal for local governments and many residents. But conservation groups warned against dotting remote mountains with phone towers.

Calls for increased service in the Adirondacks intensified in 2007 when a 63-year-old Brooklyn man froze to death after his car crashed off the Northway in North Hudson, and he was not able to use his phone to call for help.

Agency spokesman Keith McKeever said the cell tower and antenna surge was a result of increased market forces in the mobile phone industry, and not of any change by the APA in the way tower applications are considered.

"Our rules are the same. We are getting a lot more applications now than before. For a while, we were hardly getting any," he said.

McKeever said the agency several years ago adopted rules to make it easier for mobile companies to add their antennas to each other's towers. He said the APA is reviewing and processing tower applications faster than they used to.

State Sen. Betty Little, a Queensbury Republican who represents part of the Adirondacks, said it appears that the fight over cellphone towers is over.

"We don't have coverage everywhere we need but, there has been positive improvement," said

She said that the APA also has made it easier for phone companies by reducing the number of visual studies for prospective towers. The studies show how a tower would appear from multiple vantage points.

The Adirondack Council, a conservation group, had opposed creation of large towers disguised as evergreen trees or placement of towers along high points, out of concern it would spoil natural views.

Council spokesman John Sheehan said the tower surge began after cellphone companies decided to work at placing towers in less-visible settings, satisfying the council's concerns.

"Most companies are now trying to find a location with no open sky behind it, so a tower can blend into a hillside, and not be visible from a long distance away," he said. "The levels of objection to this have dropped off to nothing."