

Real Estate

Red Flags for a Flagpole Cell Tower

By VALERIE COTSALAS

RON LIPSKY lives near the strip of mom-and-pop stores in Franklin Square where T-Mobile, the cellphone carrier, has applied for permission to build a 65-foot-tall cellular phone tower in the parking lot, top it with a flag and call it a flagpole.

"I would see the tower crystal-clear from my house," Mr. Lipsky said. "I'm 100 percent worried about the value of my house."

He added that the tower is "not thin like a flagpole, it's thick all around."

Mr. Lipsky is president of the Franklin Square United Neighborhood Association, a civic group that has hired a lawyer, a telecommunications expert and an architect to testify at town of Hempstead public hearings against the proposed tower. He is all too aware that the town of Hempstead has not yet developed any detailed zoning ordinance regulating cellphone towers.

The small three- and four-bedroom Cape Cod style homes surrounding the strip mall would be dwarfed by such a tower, said State Assemblyman Tom McKeivitt, who is also a lawyer hired by the group, who said it would also be an eyesore. To update residents on the application process — which was first described at a public hearing a year ago — the group is to hold a meeting at the library on Oct. 2.

Several other disguised cell towers already exist on the Island, including an immense fake plastic tree beside Village Hall in North Hills (overlooking million-dollar homes in a golf course community), and a towering so-called flagpole on Grand Avenue in Baldwin.

"There a flag on top of it," Mr. McKeivitt said of the Baldwin tower, "but if you drive by and look up, it's so out of place, just a strange thing that's out of place."

On the mostly flat terrain of Long Island, and especially in Nassau County, where there are relatively few industrial sites to hide them, cell antennas are an increasingly obtrusive reality that residents often see as threats to property values and the local landscape.

Yet at the same time, growing demand for

cellphones and text-messaging and Internet-browsing devices has companies scrambling to fill gaps in signal coverage and bolster capacity in areas they already serve.

"We're trying to keep up with the explosive growth of our customers on Long Island," said Jane Builder, a spokeswoman for T-Mobile U.S.A. "Many people under 30 don't have landlines; they use wireless phones as a major means of communication," she added. "The expectation is that the phones will work."



Well, They're Functional Cell transmission equipment already in place. From left: Baldwin, Lido Beach and North Hills.

Ms. Builder said T-Mobile engineers had worked with Franklin Square residents to devise the most amenable antenna possible. But Mr. Lipsky disputed that assertion, saying the company didn't want to talk about alternate locations or solutions.

The civic group has also hired a telecommunications expert, Dick Comi, of the Center for Municipal Solutions, a nationwide consultant to villages and towns dealing with applications for cellular towers, to testify at a public hearing in November.

Towns need well-written laws, based on input from communications and planning experts, to guide zoning boards in granting permits, Mr. Comi said.

One example of the local legislative process at work took place in Glen Cove, where Mr. McKeivitt drew up an ordinance passed in July requiring tower installers to prove that there won't be a negative aesthetic impact, not only in summer, when trees provide cover, but at other times too. The law also requires either a list of alternative sites, or proof that there is no other suitable one, for each proposed tower.

The Glen Cove law followed a flurry of offers from cellphone company scouts to City Hall and to local business owners to put cell towers on their property in exchange for rental fees of up to \$1,500 a month, according to the mayor, Ralph V. Suozzi.

He said he had envisioned a messy hodgepodge of antennas that would soon pollute the small city's suburban landscape as business owners took advantage of the additional income.

Scrambling to create a law that would define what information the cell companies must provide to the zoning board, the city passed a moratorium on all cellphone tower construction until the ordinance was acted on.

"We wanted to have something that would say what we needed and also require companies to show us why they need to site something in a specific location," Mr. Suozzi said.

In the Franklin Square case, Mr. Comi said he had asked T-Mobile for more specific information about the tower several times over the last year but got no response.

There are other solutions more aesthetically pleasing than putting a big tower near residential areas and topping it with a flag, he said — although he acknowledged that they might be more expensive.

In a distributed-antenna system, for example, a series of smaller 18-inch-high antennas is placed on stoplights over a wide area, along with a box at each structure's base for electronic equipment. He estimated the cost at 20 to 30 percent more than for a single tall antenna — partly because, he said, cellphone companies "have entrenched themselves" in the technology of monolithic towers, investing in specific equipment and training.

In preparation for the 2006 meeting, Mr. Comi ran a "call test" with civic group members making 100 calls in the area where the tower is to be located.

"Every single call went through," he said, despite T-Mobile's claim that it needs the tower there, though he added that the company may want to increase capacity.