

## Markham tackles static over cell towers

### Confusing issue raises lots of questions from public

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There is a lot of confusion out there about cell towers, where to put them and if they are harmful.

Markham hosted a public working session Tuesday for residents in an effort to clarify how a city's resolution or decision fits into the puzzle.

There was one theme throughout the night: municipalities have more say and control in the cell tower process than they realized.

Council heard from local MPs Paul Calandra and John McCallum and heard presentations on the city's current telecommunications policy, new Industry Canada cell tower procedures and information about Health Canada's safety requirements and research.

Industry Canada has the final approval on where cell towers can locate.

Currently, there are two applications before the city – 9255 Woodbine Ave. and 9400 Kennedy Rd., both just north of 16th Avenue. Both applications were deferred by council until after this week's public meeting.

Since the city last updated its telecommunications policy, there have been 10 cell tower proposals between 15 and 45 metres in height.

"This is becoming an increasingly difficult issue because there is more and more demand for better, faster service," Mayor Frank Scarpitti said.

Industry Canada is reviewing recommendations from the federal government that include: consultation with the municipality on all cell tower projects, regardless of height; constructing the tower within three years of consulting the community; and making use of other methods of communication other than mail to notify residents of consultations including a notice in the local newspaper for towers greater than 30 metres.

As it stands, towers less than 15 metres in height are exempt from public consultation.

But Markham's own telecommunications policy is more stringent than Industry Canada's guidelines and calls for a public consultation on all cell towers regardless of height.

"As people abandon hard lines, this trend is not going to stop any time soon," Oak Ridges-Markham MP Paul Calandra said.

While Markham does not have final say on where a tower is located, the city is the first line of defence.

When a cell tower application comes before council, council has two options: concurrence or nonconcurrence.

The city's best defence is a good offence – establishing a policy that lists acceptable cell tower locations similar to the city's official plan that lists designated areas for high-rise development.

"When you plan a subdivision, not 100 per cent of local residents will agree with you," Calandra said. "If the proponent disagrees with your decision it can go to the OMB. There is no difference between a cell tower application and subdivision application. You get paid to make the decisions."

Markham's telecommunications policy calls for the city to make a decision and pass a resolution on each cell tower application.

"I don't think municipalities understand the important role they play," Calandra said. "The people who will look at it everyday have more to say than someone in Ottawa."

When a municipality says no to an application, it triggers more consultation and investigation by Industry Canada, he said.

If a city does not comment on a proposal, that is considered an approval, he said.

According to Industry Canada, a municipality must present reasonable and relevant concerns for objecting. That does not include issues such as cell signal or service, effects on property values or health concerns.

Rarely is a council decision overturned by Industry Canada, Mr. Calandra added. But there are instances when the federal regulating body can overturn a local council's decision, such as when a fire station or police station needs a new signal tower.



Markham residents protest a planned cell tower in their neighbourhood in this file photo.

While the city does make an effort to make local MPs aware of cell tower proposals in their ridings, some residents suggested involving MPs from the start of public consultation or making it part of the city's telecommunications policy, where the city is directed to send the MP a copy of the city's resolution and decision for each proposed cell tower.

Markham's cell tower policy calls on service providers to use existing infrastructure, such as other towers or buildings; to maximize the distance away from sensitive lands, such as residential areas, schools, daycares, parks and environmentally sensitive lands; stealth cell tower design coupled with public art installations and signage is prohibited.

Stephen D'Agostino of Thomson Rogers, speaking on behalf cell service providers, said Markham does not have a service issue but instead a capacity issue.

"This isn't about cell towers disguised as trees in the middle of nowhere," he said. "Telus, Rogers and Bell have mature networks. They already have service in Markham. But people want faster service."

The challenge is filling in the gaps and creating stronger signals.

He said digital capacity is needed where people are, in homes and basements.

"The issue is how do we get closer to the people," D'Agostino said. "Getting into residential areas is the challenge."

A stronger cell signal need not mean a proliferation of cell towers.

The city needs to look at and set up a policy for different types of cell service stations, including mini service towers on top of light standards in local neighbourhoods.

Another challenge includes tower height, where the taller the buildings the taller the cell tower is needed to project a signal.

There also needs to be incentives for cell providers as well, said D'Agostino, who worked with Vaughan to develop a fast track cell tower application process where the further from residential areas the easier the approval process. Vaughan's policy has yet to be adopted. All these issues should be tackled by the municipality, he said.

"You don't want to leave this to Industry Canada," he said.

"Then you lose the expertise and good judgment of local land use planners. How many land use planners are at Industry Canada."

The meeting also heard a presentation from Public Health Ontario on health risks of radio frequency emitted from cell towers.

The potential health risks associated with cell towers are regulated by Health Canada.

The technology is not new, said Dr. Jin Hee Kim of Public Health Ontario. It is the same technology used for radio signals and microwave ovens. "The use is just much more diverse and it is proliferating," she said.

Radio frequency from cell towers is not ionizing energy and is only a slice of the energy spectrum, Kim said.

There is more risk and potential harm from exposure from cell phones themselves than from cell towers, she said.

There is also more potential risk from UV radiation from the sun or from x-rays.

There were two studies done, one at the Al Palladini Community Centre in Vaughan where there was a cell tower 150 metres from the back door and the Aish Community Shul in Thornhill with a cell antenna on the roof.

Both locations came in under the federal safety code limits for exposure.

Recently, Health Canada's cell tower safety code was reviewed by Canada's top research organization, the Royal Society of Canada.

Since the science behind cell towers and cell phone use is still developing, the society recommended Health Canada continue to monitor scientific literature for emerging affects and to improve public education campaigns on radio frequency.

When pressed if Kim would send her children to a school with a neighbouring cell tower, she said she would.

"You have to look at overall exposure," she said. "The bigger concern is exposure from personal cell phone use. There could be greater risk associated with crossing Hwy. 7."

But many residents and parents said that the affects of cell phone use and cell tower exposure won't be known for several years, even decades because of the limited long-term data.

As a result of Tuesday night's meeting, a staff report and resolution will come before a future development services committee.