

Location of proposed Greenwood cell tower questioned

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Network Need: Closest Verizon Wireless Sites Serving Area ("Handoff Sites")

1. Railroad Ave, Crozet = **3.2 miles**
 2. "Yancey Mills" (Patterson Mill Ln) = **1.8 miles**
 3. "I-64" = **2.25 miles**

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Community members are questioning the location of a proposed cell tower in western Albemarle County.

The tower is proposed for slightly south of Interstate 64 along Greenwood Station Road. Verizon wants to build a 94-foot-tall monopole with two antenna arrays on the site, and will need a special-use permit from the Board of Supervisors.

During a community meeting Monday, nearby property owners questioned the selection process of the site and why the tower was not being proposed for somewhere else.

Sarah Zimmerman, one of the owners of Seven Oaks Farm and Septenary

Winery, which is next to the site, said the property is historic.

"I just can't understand why, given this, why we wouldn't consider using an alternate site for this tower before you proceed with this one, given the impact that it's going to have on the area," she said.

Lori Schweller, an attorney representing Verizon, said these are special wireless facilities that it installs in Albemarle to comply with the county's policy and zoning ordinance.

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"Lots and lots of people live in this area, not just the estate owners, and they need service, and they've been suffering with poor service," she said. "For as long as I can remember, we've been trying to get sites approved in western Albemarle, so we're trying to do that for these people who need the service."

In 2000, the county adopted the Personal Wireless Service Facilities policy, and in 2004, the policy was amended to the current three-tier system.

Tier I facilities are located within or on existing structures; Tier II facilities are treetop facilities not located within an avoidance area; and Tier III facilities are anything that is neither a Tier I nor a Tier II facility.

Despite being a treetop tower, this proposal is considered a Tier III, as it's in a historic district, which is an avoidance area, so it would need a special-use permit.

The Board of Supervisors in 2019 supported hiring a consultant to update the wireless policy, but that has been tabled.

Monday's virtual meeting started about 15 minutes late, as the Zoom link on the county website took community members who clicked on it to an old,

invalid meeting ID, and only about 35 members of the public were on the meeting when it started.

"Just 35 participants — I just don't feel that that's a real accurate representation of what we were expecting based on all the contact I had received previously," said Chris Perez, a county senior planner.

Verizon applied for the permit last year, but after an initial balloon test, it requested a deferral.

A staff report has not yet been written for the proposal, but in comments written after the July balloon test, county staff said the visibility presented at the balloon test was "not consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, the county's wireless policy or the zoning ordinance," and that "based on these preliminary findings, staff cannot recommend approval of the facility as proposed."

Another balloon test was done Jan. 11.

Most community members on the call had questions about how the site was selected.

Todd Zimmerman, who also owns Seven Oaks Farm and Septenary Winery, said he opposes the tower because he doesn't think there's been "sufficient consideration of less impactful sites."

"I'm sure, based upon the maps that I've seen, that there are better sites just a short distance down the road that may be a little more expensive for Verizon, but it sure seems like they'd be less impactful to the history of the area, still allow the visitors of our business to enjoy the good scenery and be less impactful to the history of Mirador Farm," he said.

Schweller said that with the short monopoles Verizon uses in Albemarle, the

distance of propagation of the signal is only about one and a half to three miles typically, depending on trees and buildings.

"We're right in the center of an area where there are existing wireless facilities, but a new one is needed in the middle, precisely because of that increase in data consumption and use of wireless," she said.

Schweller said Verizon has been working on the site for several years.

Some community members support the site. Barbara Frazier said her family is using a Verizon hotspot that works well except for on the weekends.

"We're about a mile from Blue Mountain Brewery and when they have a huge crowd up there, you can forget trying to get on," she said. "We also have a winery that's going in across the road from us, which is going to bring more huge crowds into this area, and we desperately need more cell service in this area."

Alice Scruby said she and her husband own the historic property across the road from the proposed site, and their family has owned the land for more than 100 years.

"If you came to my property or the proposed site, I believe the first thing you would notice is the interstate that sliced through our family's farm in the 1960s ... cutting the farm in two," she said.

"... It was a tremendous impact on the farm, and something we will have to live with forever at the farm, because it was for the greater good for people liking to drive up and down the interstate every day. And now we all like to talk on our cellphones and get on the internet every day, and these services are greatly needed."

The special-use permit is scheduled to go before the county's Architectural

Review Board on Feb. 1, as it's along an entrance corridor, as well as the Agricultural-Forestal Districts Advisory Committee on the same day, as the site is adjacent to the Yellow Mountain Agricultural and Forestal District.

It is tentatively scheduled to go before the county Planning Commission on March 2 and the Board of Supervisors on April 7.

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