

Concerns Over 10 New Cell Towers

by Kristena Schutt

The Hastings Highlands Community Centre's gym was full on Saturday, April 6, as community members voiced their concerns over 10 new 90 meter high 3G Bell cell towers that are proposed to be built in the Municipality of Hastings Highlands.

The MC for the meeting Alex Walder said at the beginning of the meeting, "We support that everyone have use and access to cell phones and the Internet, but there are other options than to build the towers over the homes of people."

This meeting was being held to voice concerns over the close proximity to homes and cottages where the towers are planned to be built and the health concerns that they bring. Seven presenters who are facing towers being built close to the places where they live came to talk about how they found out about the towers, what their fears are, and what they have researched concerning the towers.

Diane Thomas was the first presenter. She has a proposed tower location 140 meters from her home, and she asks why she wasn't notified about this before March 14, when it is believed that the location was planned before that, and why does she have only 30 days to respond. However it is believed that the legal distance from occupied structures, such as homes or businesses is 500 to 1000 meters.

Diane also quoted a letter from Bell that she received stating that Hastings Highlands councillors were involved in the process of selecting locations. Lorraine Fell, the only councillor who attended the meeting, replied to this by saying that council was not notified of the size of the towers nor the locations that they may be built in.

Michael and Karen Renton are also dealing with the fear of having a tower close to their property. They worry about the drop in their property value and the loss in the integrity of the land. These towers will take 1850 kilowatts of power each to run, and the 3G system is believed to be almost obsolete as many cell phones and other electronics now use 4G systems or higher. It will be another year and a half before the towers are built.

Matt Willis received his notification of the tower only 80 meters from his property on March 7. When he received the letter he learned about a new protocol template from the Federation of Canadian Ministry that allows municipalities a little more control in regards to cell phone towers. However the template was created after the suggested tower locations were announced so the towers do not fall within the template but he suggested that the council and the people within the township work with the template to see if they can get Bell to move the towers. He also suggested that council does not sign the letters of concurrence, but instead sign letters of non-concurrence so that the towers would not have the support of council.

Michel Arbour was the next speaker and he talked about how the towers could affect property value for those who live close to a proposed cell tower.

Most property buyers have concerns about cell towers, many when looking for a property request for nothing near a cell tower or an object similar. The properties that are located near a tower often experience a five to 20 per cent drop in market value, and it is believed that devalued property equals devalued tax base for municipalities. Arbour suggested that by-laws be written in Hastings Highlands as well as in the surrounding municipalities that say a tower has to be one kilometre from any home to save municipalities from future loss.

When asked the question on why the towers are not being placed on Crown land instead of private, Councillor Fell replied that she believed that the location of towers is chosen with a contract from the Crown and Bell, or a contract with a land owner and Bell. However Council has requested getting legal advice and a meeting was requested with Bell.

At this statement MC Alex Walder said that he received a letter from Bell and in it was a mention of a meeting with council for May 1.

Robert Sneffjella then gave a presentation on the health problems that are believed to be linked to cell towers, specifically the extremely low frequency towers. It is believed that the frequencies given off by the towers affect both mental and physical health, with everything from sleep levels to reproductive abilities affected.

Anita Krulick was the last presenter of the meeting and she mentioned that most of the chosen tower sites were not the first choice of an engineer, which makes people believe that the sights were selected for easy access. However, the proposed towers are believed to be going to cover an area that already has cell coverage from existing towers. The need for more towers comes from the fact that cell phones used to be used for short talks and text messaging; now however they are used to send colour pictures, videos and make Internet connections. This needs a higher bandwidth capacity so cell phone towers are being built throughout Canada. Over 100 new towers are believed to be under construction or in discussion stages in Ontario alone.

The speakers at this meeting voiced concerns about health risks and the loss of the area's property value and natural beauty. But they also asked why there is such a hurry to build the towers when the EORN is installing fibre optic cables, something that is believed to be a safer and faster technology, in the north and south ends of the township, and are expected to cover the community by the end of 2014.

The concerned citizens who hosted this meeting ask that those in the community who do not want towers in their back yard contact their federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government and request that the towers be moved to another location, away from occupied homes and businesses.