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Planners reject cell tower plan near U.S. 42

by Jacquelyn Stoess

Planning and zoning commissioners rejected plans for a proposed T-Mobile cell tower Tuesday based on lack of evidence that the applicant pursued other options.

Powertel/Memphis Inc., doing business as T-Mobile USA Inc., sought approval to build a 195-foot telecommunications tower on Liberty Lane in Goshen, about .22 miles from U.S. 42.

Bob Crammer, a representative for T-Mobile USA, told commissioners the tower would improve cell phone coverage on a stretch of U.S. 42 the company has deemed inadequate for emergency communications and customer service.

Many customers experience dropped calls in that stretch of roadway, he said.

“By placing this tower on Liberty Lane at 195 feet, you can see we will meet our customers’ demand and engineering standards,” he said.

When commissioners questioned lighting and guide wires required for the structure, Crammer said plans for the proposed tower include a monopole with a 36- to 42-inch diameter base and a four-foot lightning rod, bringing the structure to 199 feet tall. FAA regulations require lighting for structures 200 feet and higher, Crammer said.

Commissioners and residents questioned why T-Mobile couldn’t co-locate on an existing structure, like the new Louisville Water Company tower at the corner of U.S. 42 and Ky. 1793, a water tank behind Liberty Elementary or a green water tank behind North Oldham Fire Department’s Goshen station.

T-Mobile currently leases space on 10 telecommunications towers in Oldham County, Crammer said, but the maximum height to lease space on the LWC tank is 140 feet - much lower than the 195 feet for T-Mobile’s proposed tower.

And T-Mobile did not reach an agreement with Oldham County Schools in the past for the Liberty site because there was no option for a long-term lease, he said.

Stuart Strickler, assistant director of facilities for Oldham County Schools, testified that school

board records indicate T-Mobile negotiated with the board in 2003, but negotiations ceased at the request of T-Mobile. Strickler, who said he was not involved in negotiations, said leasing for the Liberty tower is somewhat negotiable, but market conditions change - which is why the school board doesn't offer long-term leasing. The school board and utility company share revenues from leasing.

Crammer said T-Mobile negotiated with NOFD to build a structure on fire department property, but the fire department has limited space at its Skylight station - the area where T-Mobile needs extended coverage.

In March, NOFD Chief Rick Albers announced in The Oldham Era that the NOFD is pursuing plans to construct a 260-foot communications tower at its Goshen station near the green water tank to increase communications for emergency responders.

Albers, who was reached by phone Tuesday night, said the green tank serves as a platform for radio transmitters, receivers and antennas used by Oldham County's 911 Dispatch Center and is leased by several cellular phone service providers.

He describes construction of a new tower as "mission-critical" - the green water tank is scheduled for demolition in the fall, he said. A telecommunications company will foot the bill for a new tower, and in return, will co-locate on the tower rent-free for several years. Revenue from other cell phone carriers could increase the department's operating budget for equipment and gear, which will provide better fire protection for residents, Albers said.

T-Mobile's proposed tower on Liberty Lane could accommodate up to five cell phone carriers, Crammer said.

Resident Doug Wampler spoke in opposition to T-Mobile's proposed tower and cited state law which allows the planning commission to deny an application based on an applicant's unwillingness to co-locate on other structures.

Wampler said there is a potential for T-Mobile to collect revenue on a standalone tower, rather than leasing from Oldham County Schools where there is potential for revenue that could prevent increased taxes for school funding.

"We need to do what's best for Oldham County, not T-Mobile," Wampler said.

Commissioners questioned the need for another telecommunications tower, since other carriers co-locate on the water tower at Liberty Elementary. But Crammer said building a telecommunications tower is the company's last resort. About 80 percent of T-Mobile's statewide coverage is based on co-location with other carriers, he said.

Wampler said he doesn't see evidence of T-Mobile's willingness to co-locate with Oldham County Schools, other than an attempt four years ago.

Commissioner Greg King motioned to deny an application for the proposed tower and said a

short-term lease with Oldham County Schools doesn't seem like an inconvenience for T-Mobile.

Commissioner Frank Fain seconded the motion.

"Based on everything I've heard, it seems to me there's an opportunity to colocate a tower..." he said. "I'm not convinced that's not a viable alternative."

Commissioners voted 11-1 to deny the application, with John McRoberts dissenting.

"And I don't even own a cell phone," McRoberts said.

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