

Debate on Pilar cell tower goes to commissioners

By J.R. Logan

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A Colorado-based company wants to build a 60-foot tower in Pilar to improve cell coverage in southern Taos County. But area residents have raised concerns about the tower's location near the Rio Grande, and a nearby acequia association is openly opposing the project.

The proposed location is on the west side of the R'io Grande, just south of Camino de las Vacas in Pilar. The application for a permit to build the structure says the property is owned by David and Mauricio Sanchez of Greeley, Colorado.

Commnet Wireless, based in Castle Rock, Colorado, is proposing to lease a 50-by-50-foot portion of the parcel, plus an easement to access the equipment.

A memo from an engineer working on the project and submitted to the county planning department said it would be a boon for people who live and recreate in Pilar.

"The expanded coverage from the proposed Pilar site will benefit both residents and tourists of the area, by providing coverage in a previously poorly covered or unserved area that will help in emergencies," the memo reads. "In addition, cell phone usage is continually on the rise, with the demand for quality coverage and new technologies, and this proposed site will help meet those demands."

A representative of Commnet said at a recent hearing on the issue that the proposed tower would provide cell service within about a 1.5-mile radius of the tower.

Online records on the Federal Communications Commission website show Comment already owns towers in Red River, Ranchos de Taos and Costilla.

The memo said several sites were analyzed around Pilar before the company settled on the proposed location. Two alternative locations — one at the Wild and Scenic Rivers Visitors Center and another at a water tank between State Roads 68 and 87 — were reviewed, but the memo said those options weren't pursued because both are on Bureau of Land Management property and the permitting process on federal lands usually takes two years to complete.

A report prepared by county staff stated that the cell tower "will provide substantial benefit to property owners" in the area, noting that cell service is currently "lacking."

The report also asserted: "... the proposed appearance of the cell tower with its flat green paint scheme and proposed location will not create a detrimental visual impact to adjacent property owners ..." However, some residents have expressed outrage over the proposal.

A Feb. 4 letter from a Pilar acequia association to the county states that it is “strongly opposed” to the proposed location because, among other reasons, the tower site encroaches on the nearby acequia.

The Taos Soil and Water Conservation District offered written comments on the proposal. The district concluded the ditch is an active acequia, and its staff noted that the applicant included no explicit indication that access to the ditch would be granted.

The letter from the acequia association also took issue with the claim that the tower wouldn’t have an aesthetic impact on the village and river corridor.

“The tower will be an eyesore,” The letter reads. “This area must remain pristine.”

While the tower would be near the banks of the Rio Grande in a corridor afforded protections under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the assessment references comments from BLM staff that the tower would not be contrary to those protections.

The letter went on to say the claims that cell service was lacking were overstated. “Those who claim a ‘need’ are confusing necessary with convenience,” the letter reads.

On May 13, the Taos County Planning and Zoning Commission essentially halted the project when it refused to grant a variance so the tower could be located closer to the property boundary than the existing regulations on setbacks allow. Commnet has appealed that decision.

The Taos County Commission has set a date to hear the appeal Aug. 1, 10 a.m. in the commission chambers on Albright Street.