

Conway Planning Board
Vertex Tower Assets cell tower public hearing

Tuesday, May 10, 2022
Conway Town Hall and via Zoom

Meeting convened at 7 p.m.

Members present: Chair Beth Girshman and Joe Strzegowski (associate member) Jennifer Mullins, Susan Fentin in Town Hall; William Moebius and George Forcier via Zoom. (ZBA members Mark Silverman, Peter Jeswald and Phyllis Craine in Town Hall for joint hearing, with member Andy Levchuck on Zoom)

Public in attendance: (FCAT recording in Town Hall);

In Town Hall: Veronique Blanchard, town administrator; Laurie Lucier, town clerk; Lee Whitcomb of 1528 Ashfield Road; Fire Chief Robert Baker (112 Elm Street); Helen Baker (112 Elm Street); Barbara Masson of 124 Main Poland Road; Chris Waldo of 99 Orchard St.; Walter Goodridge of 1118 S. Deerfield Road; Chris Larabee, reporter/Greenfield Recorder. Fran Parisi of Vertex Tower Assets of Wrentham, applicant; Tom Johnson of Proterra Design, with Vertex; Dianna Dapkins of 336 Patten Hill Road, Shelburne; Deb Craven of 42 N. Poland Road; Jane Majkiewicz of 1490 Main Poland Road; Henry Horstmann of 1128 Ashfield Road; Bob Armstrong of 25 Thompson Road; Bobbi Melville and Alicia Marquez of 1356 Ashfield Road; Jonathan Mirin of 224 Avery Brook Road, Charlemont. Dianna Dapkins of Shelburne

Zoom: Mary McClintock of Deerfield Road; Devlin Selman of Main Poland Road; Gerry LeBlanc of Main Poland Road; Fred Goldstein, Interisle Consulting; Tina and Steve Ricardi; “Jean”; “Susan”; “Anthony”; Winston Burt, Alice Vigliani.

Public hearing:

Vertex representative Fran Parisi opened hearing with general overview of the proposed cell tower off 1356 Ashfield Road (Route 116) to improve wireless communication along Route 116 from Burkeville to South Ashfield with a 150-foot tower (plus 6-foot lighting rod). The tower requires a Planning Board special permit, and a Zoning Board of Appeals variance from the town tower height limit of 120 feet.

Parisi noted that although the tower and access drive avoid wetlands, Vertex consulted with the Conservation Commission at the Planning Board’s suggestion, had a site visit with the ConCom and is in the process of adjusting the project to accommodate the commission’s erosion concerns.

Parisi explained that Vertex isn’t a “wireless carrier” as called for in the town’s zoning bylaw, but rather builds towers on behalf of wireless carriers and therefore seeks a waiver from that technical requirement through a Planning Board order of conditions, per town counsel advice, and has agreed to only seek a building permit after it gets

commitment from at least one wireless carrier to use the tower. The developer said the ZBA height variance is needed to satisfy the needs of potential multiple carriers.

By way of touting Vertex's experience and reputation, Parisi said his company has already received approval to build a sister tower on the Deerfield side of town, and in other western Mass. towns like Shutesbury, Colrain, Ashfield, Otis, and Rowe and has permits for about 20 in New Hampshire.

Because the tower access will cross some very steep grades and is uphill of the South River, both the Planning Board and ConCom have expressed a desire that the site have good erosion control and storm water management. He described the access as a robust driveway that will have no stormwater runoff impact.

Parisi said the tower is needed to fill a gap in cell coverage along Route 116 between Burkeville and South Ashfield. He asserted that prompt highway emergency response increasingly depends on good cell coverage. (75 percent of 911 calls come from cells, he said.)

He said the site is attractive because although the access is longer and steeper than they like, one-third to half of the access up the hill already exists in the form of a driveway and field, although the ConCom is likely to require Vertex to improve the existing driveway with more gravel.

The compound near the summit will be 60 feet by 60 feet "in the middle of the woods." There will be concrete foundations for the monopole tower and related telecommunications equipment. Parisi said the tower will feature a lightning rod and extensive grounding. He said it would be a very safe facility like the hundreds of thousands built across the country.

He said the transmitters are "very low power" at 100 watts.

Parisi said cell tower developers are heavily regulated by federal agencies to ensure protection of environmental and historical resources like native flora and fauna and Native American artifacts. He said that the extra driveway work sought by the ConCom will actually trigger more Environmental Protection Agency scrutiny.

The monopole will be similar in design to one located behind the South Deerfield Fire Station, albeit taller.

Balloon tests showed that Vertex "did a pretty good job" of siting the tower where it won't be readily seen, Parisi said. The tower will be visible year round poking just above the hillside trees from one location in North Poland Road, and from Murray Road in Ashfield, over a mile away. It will be visible some of the year from near Burnett's Farm on North Poland Road, according to Parisi, who showed maps and photos to illustrate the balloon test findings.

ZBA member Craine sought assurances that there will always be someone town officials could contact on short notice after the tower were built, and that appropriate

locally officials and residents would be alerted of any blasting during construction. She asked whether global supply chain problems might prevent the tower from being completed. Parisi noted most supply chain problems affected the cell carriers and that he would not pull a permit until he had a carrier under contract.

ZBA Chair Silverman asked Parisi to respond to concerns the tower might become obsolete with the advent of 5G networks. Parisi said the tower will never become obsolete although it might be supplemented by other small transmitter locations in the future.

Silverman then asked Parisi to respond to the criteria specified in the law for granting variances. Parisi's principal answer was that the 150 feet was necessary to serve the telecom companies and that the topography along Route 116 limits where they can place towers, which he characterized as meeting a public good for residents, travelers and emergency responders.

In response to Planning Board member Mullins, Parisi said state law allows 2 years to commence construction and that he doesn't expect to need an extension but would seek one if unforeseen circumstances (like pandemics) required it. He also noted that Vertex provides a bond to cover costs of dismantling the tower. Parisi and property owner Bobbi Melville said there are no plans to cut trees beyond the drive and tower compound, as the property also contains a wilderness survival and education camp.

Bob Armstrong, speaking as a resident, not as selectman, said a 100-watt transmitter "strikes me as incredibly low power."

Fire Chief Bob Baker supported the project, arguing good cell coverage along 116, especially west of Burkeville, is increasingly vital for first responders. Baker said the town's firefighters now use a cellphone based app to organize and coordinate in emergencies. "Anything you can do to improve cell coverage in Conway would be tremendous," he said.

Assessor Lee Whitcomb noted that the tower and the transmitters will be new taxable assets, although she had no figures yet.

In a letter read into the record, abutter Bill Burnett, whose family farm has existed on North Poland Road since 1781, and who has been an Ashfield and Conway firefighter for decades, said he was 100 percent behind the project. He cited an anecdote about a bike accident in which help may have come sooner with better cell coverage.

(Whitcomb also cited an anecdote involving an accident on glare ice late at night in which help could not be called without walking a long distance.)

Goldstein, the radio frequency consultant hired by the Planning Board, noted that the proposed tower would not just provide cell coverage to travelers along Route 116, but

also provide 90 Conway homes with “solid coverage” and another 137 in Conway with “less solid coverage” and 152 in Ashfield with “good” service.

Henry Horstmann, supported the project, saying it would help the fire department. Recalling another anecdote about an accident on 116, he said the cell tower is a “small price to pay” for improved safety.

Returning briefly to issues of EMS radio service, Parisi said Vertex would unequivocally agree to reserve space on the tower for EMS equipment.

Asked by Walter Goodridge if Vertex might sell the tower, Parisi concurred that has and could happen but that all conditions placed by the town on the tower would apply to new owners.

Devlin Selman, while saying she is “all for cell service,” nonetheless sought information about Vertex background and sought assurances stormwater management and erosion control would be handled better than she has seen at the access to a solar farm on North Poland Road near her home.

Parisi responded that Vertex stands by its reputation, is very familiar with state wetlands regulations and is now working closely with the Conservation Commission.

In response to concerns about 5G networks and their possible impacts, it was noted that the FCC, not the local Planning Board, has jurisdiction over health issues. Parisi asserted that 5G isn’t new tech, but rather the same radio transmissions that have been used for decades, just at different frequencies, and being deployed to meet growing needs for interconnectivity especially in urban areas.

Goldstein elaborated, saying that 5G isn’t fundamentally different from 4G but refers to “anything done since a certain date” — an evolution of tech at different frequencies. 5G is for high-use, high-density urban areas, he said. Given the low density use in this area he said it’s highly unlikely that 5G systems would every come here.

“This is a 4g rural coverage zone for which 5G is a “nothing burger,” he said.

Referring to suggestions cell tower transmissions are unhealthy, Goldstein said he wouldn’t hold a cell phone next to his head “all day” but use blue tooth tech and hold the phone away from his head, but the tower signals are so low power he doubts they pose any health threat.

— Chris Waldo, who said he had 20 years of telecom industry experience, discussing the attributes of 4G and 5G, said there is absolutely no difference in the nature of the

signals, just the frequencies. He said lower frequencies can travel farther, so high frequency 5G signals are less likely to work well in rural areas because of the trees.

Waldo also asked Parisi some technical questions about sectorized versus omnidirectional transmitters to be used on the tower. Parisi said the sectorized approach will target the 116 corridor more effectively.

Jonathan Mirin of Charlemont asserted that Conway should reject the proposal because of "environmental justice issues," arguing that the only real way to "beat this thing" is to hire a lawyer — which is difficult for low income people. He urged denying the waiver from the wireless carrier requirement so people don't have to raise money to fight the proposal. He suggested that Vertex be told to reapply after it builds the other Conway tower that has been permitted and has "partnered at least with a carrier for this one." He also asserted that wireless infrastructure is slower and uses more energy than wired ones. He asserted that cell towers "have a history of catching fire". He suggested requiring the driveway be plowed in the winter. He tried to cast doubt on the accuracy of the coverage maps, saying they were based on predictive computer models, not dropped call data. He also cast other aspersions on the safety of cell tower emissions for people and animals. He also asserted that the tower will become obsolete because future communications will be carried by a vast network of low-orbit satellites.

Dianna Dapkins of Shelburne said she is "surrounded" by towers and implied she is of ill health as a consequence . She urged checking the Web for information about the health effects of cell towers.

After some discussion, the ZBA and Planning Board agreed to continue the joint hearing to May 19 at 8 p.m. to give time to review information Vertex submitted today about driveway improvements requested by the ConCom. Additional written comments will be accepted until then.

Fentin moved to continue, with Mullins seconding. Unanimous vote. (Strzegowski did not vote on this issue as an associate member)

Meeting adjourned at 9:38: Unanimous vote.