

Kensington antenna plan gets poor reception

By Rick Radin

Correspondent

Posted: 03/06/2013 10:48:14 AM PST

Updated: 03/07/2013 09:55:35 AM PST

KENSINGTON -- The board that advises Contra Costa supervisors on Kensington affairs has bowed to resident concerns by recommending denial of AT&T's applications to install new cell phone towers.

AT&T has applied to the county to install the towers, which the company calls "nodes," on utility poles in nine locations in unincorporated Kensington to improve the quality of voice connections and increase the speed of Internet data feeds, said company spokesman Lane Kasselmann.

Opponents of the towers are concerned about their view-blocking potential as well as possible threats to public health from microwave radiation they generate, according to county Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond.

The recommendation to deny the applications came at a Feb. 26 meeting of the Kensington Municipal Advisory Council after an AT&T representative declined an opportunity to install so-called "story poles" to determine whether the towers would significantly alter or block views when mounted on existing utility poles.

About 150 residents attended the meeting, with most speakers in a public comment session opposing the towers, said Gioia, who also attended the meeting.

"(AT&T) was given the option of continuing the hearing and providing the (story poles), but they wanted recommendations that evening, so I guess they got them," said former advisory council member Ray Barraza.

Kasselmann said AT&T is "actively exploring" the logistics of installing the poles.

"Our representative at the meeting couldn't positively say 'yes,' so he probably said 'I'm not sure,'" Kasselmann said. "We have (installed poles) in other communities."

The county is prohibited from considering health concerns in evaluating such applications because of a Federal Communications Commission edict that cell phone transmitters do not pose a significant public health threat, Gioia said.

The board's recommendations are now in the hands of the county zoning administrator, Gioia said.

Any ruling from the administrator could be appealed to the county Planning Commission, and a commission decision could be appealed to the five-member Board of Supervisors, he said.

"The MAC's recommendations aren't binding, but they're taken pretty seriously," Gioia said. "They can't comment on ugly, but they consider views, light, bulk and scale."

Some Kensington residents favor the towers, including Rodney Paul, who describes the community's cell phone reception as "spotty" and worries that poor service could be a threat to public safety in a fire or earthquake.

"In nearby communities, we've seen fatalities from earthquake and fire in the not-distant past," Paul wrote in an article posted online. "Addressing these risks should be a top priority, and having strong communications could be critical to a successful response."

Kasselman said AT&T is planning to meet with other community groups and wants to work with residents near where the towers would be installed to address their concerns.

"There's a lot of misinformation about wireless connections," he said. "This stuff is vital for information. There's a real need for it."

Gioia said that if the applications reach the Board of Supervisors, he will ask for "additional peer review of the technology," including whether AT&T needs nine towers and whether they are the correct technology and in the correct locations.