

Editorial – Noxious Neighbors

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Churches have become the telecom target of choice to place new wireless antenna facilities located in the heart of residential neighborhoods. In most cases, these cell towers would not otherwise get approvals. The invisible burden of constant radiofrequency radiation exposure for homes and schools in close proximity (up to 1000-2000') can disrupt peace of mind. It can lower property values. Why do churches do this at the expense of friends and neighbors?

Its deeply unsettling to think that churches opt to use their privileged status to introduce commercial uses into residential areas that are widely acknowledged to make people sick. Church facilities typically need a conditional use permit from the municipality to build within land use zones that are designated for residential use. Since they are a 'special use', they need a special permit.

They are typically subjected to conditions of approval, which restrict them to what amounts to 'good land use behavior compatible with a quiet, residential (non-commercial use) neighborhood.

A conditional use permit (or CUP) is normally granted for churches on the assumption that they have light environmental impacts (traffic, lighting, noise, etc). They have historically been given the presumption in the past that they can be compatible neighbors in residential areas.

Well, things have changed. Churches are now courted by the telecom industry as willing partners for cell towers and antennas. Churches, like the rest of us, are facing hard economic times and the money looks good.

But, there are legitimate questions about health risks. It is not right for churches to promote special industry interests in 'the back door' to our most vulnerable places to live and raise children while hiding behind the industry mantra that "there are no proven health effects" or "we comply with FCC standards".

Its time to re-evaluate whether churches, like Trojan horses, should be permitted to 'stealth' wireless facilities into residential neighborhoods – and whether they deserve 'special status' conveyed by CUP status. These CUPs come up for renewal every so often. Have Church officials who lease out space for wireless telecom installations considered that offended and worried neighbors may show up at their next CUP hearing and say "no more extension of your permit to be here"?