

Draft minutes from Communications Tower Public Forum - June 20, 2012
Capital Facilities Planning and Budgeting Committee

Committee members present: Ed Childs, Neil Fulton (non-voting), Tom Gray, John Lawe, Evan Pierce, Barry Rotman, Richard Stucker. Absent: Tom Sterling. Selectboard members present: Ed Childs, Linda Cook, Keith Moran. Absent: Christopher Ashley, Steve Flanders.

Gray provided a brief opening, thanking those present for attending, introducing Committee members present and noting that the Selectboard warning did not envision an actual meeting but was necessary because three Selectboard members were present.

Town Manager Fulton presented a PowerPoint describing reasons for the proposed communications tower, locations considered, communications coverage improvement expected, and projected cost. The PowerPoint is available on the Norwich Town website at <http://reports.norwich.vt.us/CommunicationsPlanPP.pdf>. Fire Chief Steve Leinoff, Police Chief Doug Robinson, and Public Works Director Andy Hodgdon described problems with the existing communications system.

The primary driver behind the proposal is a nationwide mandate from the Federal Communications Commission ordering municipal agencies to reduce the channel spacing they use from 25 kiloHertz (kHz) to 12.5 kHz, effective January 1, 2013. The 50% reduction in bandwidth will significantly degrade Norwich's public safety and Public Works communications from their present levels, which are already inadequate. Communications quality is assessed using a standard Delivered Audio Quality (DAQ) measurement scale. On this scale, DAQ 2 means "Speech understandable with considerable effort. Requires frequent repetition due to noise or distortion." DAQ 3.4 means "Speech understandable without repetition. Some noise or distortion present." Once the FCC requirement takes effect (1/1/13), only 36% of the land area of Norwich will be at DAQ 2 or better. With the proposed new simulcast system, better than 90% of the land area would be at DAQ 3.4 or better.

The total cost of the new system is currently estimated at \$397,000, taking account of grants received. If that amount were funded through a 10-year bond, the cost to the owner of a \$400,000 home would be \$14 per year.

During and following Fulton's presentation, Town residents raised a variety of concerns and questions:

Question - Better (not worse) communications coverage is badly needed in the Chapel Hill Road area. (Response: the proposed system will improve communications in this area)

Question - The proposed multi-town system for Fire/EMS includes Bradford--why not Sharon? (Response: Sharon is on a different system. If the proposed system is built, it may be possible to consolidate with Sharon at some future point.)

Question - What about other locations? (Response: This location along with 5 other locations comes close to 95% coverage 95% of the time. If the tower falls at the proposed location, it would be entirely on Town land. The proposed location has ready access to telephone lines and power, and is reachable for construction or repairs via Class 4 road. These attributes are not true for other locations suggested.)

Question - Proposed location presents a health hazard to residents within 1/4 mile and to transfer station visitors due to electromagnetic field radiation from the transmitter. (Response: Tower transmitters normally operate less than 5% of time. Existing DPW transmitter has higher field density at transfer station.)

Question - What about satellite radio? (Response: Equipment needs to work inside buildings and on specific allowed frequencies.)

The forum adjourned at approximately 9 p.m. The Committee (Fulton, Childs, Stucker, Gray, Lawe) held a brief informal meeting following the forum to share impressions of the input provided, but took no actions.