

MADISON

Alexander residents challenge Verizon's proposed plans to build cell tower



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ALEXANDER - For the second time in three months, Alexander residents find themselves embroiled in a dispute with developers proposing a project in the rural community that sits on the Buncombe County border.

Verizon Wireless is proposing to build a 199-foot cell phone tower at 28 Brad Anna Lane, near the Buncombe County border.

On April 23, Verizon submitted to the Board of Adjustment an application for a conditional use permit to build on the location. The board filed the application on April 26.

A site development zoning specialist with Faulk & Foster, a commercial and residential real estate company that provides wireless network development consultation, appears on the application as a representative for Verizon.

The intended use of the cell tower is "to improve coverage around the vicinity (and) improve network data throughput speeds for area customers," according to the application.

Jessica and Anthony Gunduz live on Heather Downs Drive in Alexander. Their property sits right beside the proposed tower's location.

Jessica Gunduz said she and her husband received a notice in the mail alerting them of the proposed tower. According to Gunduz, the notice said the Board of Adjustment would meet on June 7 to discuss the project.

"We didn't really know the extent of this," she said. "So, I contacted a lawyer who advised me to get the application that Verizon sent (the county). That's when things really got hectic for us. That's when we realized it was going to be 220 feet from our living room."

Residents' concerns

While the proposed tower's proximity to their house was one concern, the Gunduzes said they suspected the developer's planned location for the facility was intended to reach residents in Buncombe, not Madison County.

"They want to pay Madison County taxes but serve Buncombe County," Gunduz said. "We brought this to the Board (of Adjustment)'s attention (on June 7)."

County Zoning and Planning Director Terrey Dolan said that issue works both ways, though.

"There are cell towers in northern Buncombe County that serve Madison County," Dolan said. "It's all under the category of essential utilities. Essential utilities are things that are deemed to be in the public domain that need to be installed in given locations, to fill things like gap coverage."

Diana Alvear, a representative with Verizon Wireless, responded to the residents' concerns in an email to The News-Record.

"Verizon and our partners follow all local, state and federal requirements while constructing all communications infrastructure," Alvear said. "Our proposed construction is part of Verizon's strategy to enhance critical connectivity for our customers, including businesses and first responders."

Zenina Farm tower

Another issue raised by residents was why Verizon chose to construct a new tower, rather than use the preexisting cell tower located at Zenina Farm, near the intersection of Ivy River Road and U.S. 25-70.

Article 8.7.6 of the Madison County Land Use Ordinance reads, "No new broadcast communication facilities shall be approved unless the Board of Adjustment finds that the equipment for the proposed tower cannot be accommodated on existing towers located within a one-mile search radius of the proposed site."

The Gunduzes said the Zenina Farm tower is only 0.8 of a mile away from their property.

According to Dolan, Farmer and the Verizon team's radio frequency (RF) engineers established that the Zenina Farm tower was unusable. For one, the Zenina Farm tower is one of the oldest in the county, built in the 1980s, and it only serves U.S. Cellular customers, Dolan said.

Dolan said Farmer emphasized to him that Verizon would use the Zenina Farm tower if it was usable.

According to a statement of compliance, the preexisting tower site has a deficit of 185 feet ground elevation, and the structured height as proposed at only 180 feet does not meet Verizon's system objective.

Dolan said the county is having an independent RF engineer review the application done by Verizon to ensure the Zenina Tower is unusable for collocation.

During the June 7 Board of Adjustment meeting, the board approved a separate tower located near Wolf Laurel Country Club in Mars Hill.

"You need good cell service up there," Dolan said. "You've got emergencies - people break their legs, their hips, their backs. You need fast emergency response."

"A lot of the board members seemed to be receptive to what we were telling them. Anthony Gunduz said. "I think that's why we have a table now."

Other concerns

The Gunduzes, both of whom are realtors, said they worry about the property value of their home being impacted by the cell tower.

"If I get this thing stuck 200 feet from me, we could be talking about (a) \$100,000 (depreciation,)" Anthony Gunduz said. "It'll be the first thing you see when you come into our neighborhood. Nobody's going to spend \$500,000 to live next to a cell phone tower.

Additionally, the Gunduzes said they are worried about the tower's potential impact on their many pets. In all, they have more than 40 pets - including goats, peacocks, roosters and dogs.

"We've got multiple generations of different species," Anthony Gunduz said. "I've got multiple species of dogs that were born here. Multiple species of goats that were born here. It's our home."

The Board of Adjustment is awaiting the results of the independent RF engineer's assessment of Verizon's application. Dolan said the target date for the next meeting to discuss the project is "the end of July."

To view the Gunduzes' GoFundMe page, visit <https://www.gofundme.com/f/cell-tower-opposition-fund> or click [here](#).