

Markey trying to meet with Sprint on antennas

By Monica Deady / Staff Writer

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Congressman Edward Markey has joined the brewing battle against Sprint PCS in Watertown over a cluster of antennas the telecommunications company plans to mount in the West End.

According to Markey's policy director, Joe Dalton, the congressman's office placed a call to Sprint on Tuesday in an effort to arrange a meeting with the company. Markey, a Malden Democrat who represents the 7th Middlesex District, is the ranking Democrat on the Telecommunications and the Internet Subcommittee of the House and Energy and Commerce Committee.

Dalton said the congressman's office had received a number of calls from members of the Watertown Town Council, state Rep. Peter Koutoujian and some residents, which led them to try to arrange a meeting with Sprint through their government relations office.

As of the TAB's deadline, Sprint had not returned the call.

"It's just to keep folks talking if there's another solution," Dalton explained. "This is complicated in that the town has entered into settlement discussions. With that as a backdrop we're trying to continue talking [with Sprint] to try to continue that process."

"I do want to assure you Congressman Markey's office is hearing the Town Council," Town Council President Pam Piantedosi said at Tuesday night's council meeting.

The suit originated in 2000, when the Zoning Board of Appeals denied Sprint the right to install nine antennas on a building at 2 Rosary Drive. Sprint fought back with a lawsuit, which the town announced earlier this month they would settle out of court.

According to recently published reports, Sprint spokeswoman Kathleen Dunleavy said the antennas will begin to be installed next month.

However, when contacted, Dunleavy said she was no longer working on the case.

Sprint spokesman Mark Elliot told the TAB that the situation was still pending, so it was not Sprint's policy to comment. He said he had no idea when a settlement would be reached, but that they were hoping to reach a settlement as soon as possible.

In addition to the congressman's office involving themselves, a group of about 15 elected officials and neighbors to the 2 Rosary Drive site, a building owned by the Dominican Sisters, have also started meeting to determine if there's any way they themselves can fight Sprint.

School Committee member Stephen Messina is the leader of the group, and said the long-term plans of the group are to "get Sprint to listen to the people who live here. This committee feels there's enough cell phone antennas in Watertown."

According to a list recently compiled by the ZBA, 87 cell antennas have been raised in Watertown, but only 78 have been approved by the ZBA.

One other case is currently in litigation. A request by Cingular for three roof-mount pole antennas was denied for 2 Belmont St. Prior to Cingular's request, Nextel was approved to place six antennas on the building and Northcoast Communications was allowed to place three antennas on the building.

Cingular's petition was denied because there was a condition placed on the Northcoast Communications permit, which said no additional carriers could be added to the site, zoning officer Nancy Scott said.

Mary McHugh, a resident of 100 Warren St., said the neighbors are organizing for when Sprint comes to install the antennas and are planning on releasing items to the public about the possible health dangers of the antennas. In addition, Messina said the neighbors also plan to march and hold signs in protest when Sprint arrives to install the antennas.

"We're not letting go of all this," McHugh said. "This has really got me mad."

"This seems to be the path of least resistance for [Sprint]," Messina said. "Why deal with other communities when they can just deal with us?"

Piantedosi read a statement at Tuesday's meeting outlining the reasons the town was forced to settle. Piantedosi explained the Federal Telecommunications Act and how it limits the ability of towns to deny permits to wireless communication companies for the purpose of building out their service area.

In addition to the neighbors fighting Sprint, the Dominican Sisters are also looking for a way to get out of their deal with the company.

"We are now looking to talk to Sprint about a way to get out of this contract," Community Relations Coordinator Dana Hinton said. Hinton said their attorneys recently brought it to Sprint's attention and are waiting to see if anything can be done.

"We were just looking at a way to create some more revenue," Hinton said, adding that the money would be used toward the day-care center in the building. "If we'd had any idea this was going to happen, we certainly wouldn't have decided to go with it."

Susan Lurier, president of the Trustees of Siena Village, a condominium complex near the proposed Sprint site, said the citizen group is trying to get the sisters to be more "proactive" and they are working with them in their efforts.

Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department LLC, in Farmington, Conn., said he thought an issue like this would not necessarily reach a national level, but stay on a regional level.

Dresner called the fact that a religious order and a day-care center were involved in the building "hot buttons that a PR professional should be picking up on."

"Imagewise as PR you have to be very sensitive," Dresner said. "Whatever you do is going to affect, directly or indirectly on the stock price."

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