

Large cell towers sparking debate

San Marcos approves new antennas despite resident concerns about visual impact, property values

By [David Garrick \(/staff/david-garrick/\)](/staff/david-garrick/) 9:51 p.m. Oct. 22, 2013

SAN MARCOS — A plan to add a second cell tower — and possibly a third — to a residential property in San Marcos is sparking debate about how many of the antennas homeowners should be allowed.

Cell towers, often disguised to look like trees or architectural features, can create an income stream for property owners whose land is in a spot where wireless companies want to boost service. But neighbors sometimes complain that multiple towers near homes can be an eyesore that hurts property values.

That's what is happening in San Marcos, where dozens of people flooded a City Council meeting Tuesday night to fight plans for a second tower on a 10-acre residential property that overlooks their homes.

The property owner, Jeff Brandon, was seeking to add a 35-foot AT&T tower to his land, next to a 30-foot T-Mobile tower installed about five years ago. Verizon has also spoken to the city about adding a tower there.

Council members ultimately voted 4-1 Tuesday to approve the plan, with some conditions — including that trees be planted to help screen the towers from neighbors. The council also said it would tighten city rules later this year on cell towers to add limits on the number of antennas allowed per property.

Federal telecommunications law gives cities some discretion over cell towers, but most local municipalities have chosen not to restrict property rights in that way. San Marcos would be among the first in the region to do so; the county Board of Supervisors has already approved cell tower restrictions for unincorporated areas.

San Diego County cities "tend to regulate a little less intensely than Orange or Los Angeles counties," said Jonathan Kramer, an attorney working on cell tower legislation with San Marcos and dozens of other cities.

A homeowner in Solana Beach has six cell towers on his property, which is just east of Interstate 5, Kramer said. And a homeowner near the freeway in northern Encinitas has at least four towers, he said.

Depending on location and other factors, homeowners receive anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000 per month for each tower, Kramer said.

Brandon — the San Marcos property owner — declined to say how much he earns by having the structures on his land. But he said the residents have exaggerated the visual damage antennas do.

"You don't notice it unless you're looking for it," said Brandon, who's lived on the property for 23 years. "Some of the pictures they've used to rile people up have been misleading."

Nearby neighbors disagreed.

"This is going to look horrible," said Mark Anderson, who with his wife Suzanne lives just below Brandon's property. "A group of fake pine trees out in the middle of nowhere looks ridiculous."

Connie Signorino, unofficial leader of the residents group, says San Marcos has approved 27 cell towers in the last five years and hasn't rejected any proposals.

"The cellphone company and the homeowner want this, and we all suffer because the city won't do anything to stop it," she said.

She said the residents are worried it will become similar to a conspicuous property on Washingtonia Drive just outside of San Marcos, where several cell and radio towers have been erected.

On Tuesday, the council directed City Attorney Helen Peak to revise the city's ordinance so such cell tower farms won't be built in San Marcos.

However, Kramer, the consultant, said cities could lose even more of their limited power to regulate the antennas under a Federal Communications Commission proposal unveiled last month.

The proposal, which could become law next year, would force cities to approve virtually all cell tower proposals.

“Congress has said we want wireless technology available to as many people as possible and in as many places as possible,” he said.

Brandon said his San Marcos property is so large that the only people affected by the tower will be him, his wife and their four children.

“It will affect our quality of life and nobody else’s,” he said.

Brandon said his stance on cell towers has been informed by his frustration about all the development near his home in recent years, including the 3,000-home San Elijo Hills community.

“If I had my choice, none of this stuff would be here,” he said. “But people need to remember that it’s a fact of life you don’t get to control what development happens on other property.”

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