

Kingsmill towers are up for review

New technology may make them obsolete

By Cortney Langley

JAMES CITY — An internal dispute over cell phone towers in Kingsmill has spilled outside the gates into the arena of county policy.

A few Kingsmill residents have long opposed the addition of two cell phone towers near the complex's soccer fields, while others welcome the increased coverage. Homeowners as far away as Port Anne in Williamsburg are rooting for the towers to improve their own reception.

Opponents argue that the towers will be too close to their homes and could devalue them as a result. They also argue that the looming towers are becoming outmoded quicker than they can be constructed.

• Because no rezoning is required, the county quietly approved the Kingsmill towers administratively. Opponents organized under the moniker Kingsmill Wireless Communication Advocacy Group have appealed the decision.

The ruckus has prompted a special meeting of the Planning Commission's Development Review Committee this week, allowing the group a hearing. If that doesn't work, it plans to file with the Board of Zoning Appeals.

The issue has caught the attention of countywide activists James City County Citizens' Coalition, which views the issue as more far-reaching. The coalition notes that tower hearings arise frequently, yet the county has no long-range policy.

"As the Comprehensive Plan update is under way, the time is appropriate to address new technologies and to factor these into telecommunication plans and ordinances for all of James City County," said J4C founder Sarah Kadec.

Her group has taken up a primary argument of the Kingsmill opponents. Namely • that as cell phone usage continues to increase, the need for huge cell towers will

become obsolete. Instead, the technology will trend toward smaller, "infill" antennae. Metro areas in California have already moved to less-obtrusive technology.

One promising idea is the deployment of "distributed antennae systems," which rely on underground fiber-optic cable, with only small distributed antennae. Kadec pointed to Hilton Head Plantation, a South Carolina development similar to Kingsmill.

"It was almost a certainty that this upscale development would require high towers to provide the much-needed — and wanted — telephone service," Kadec said. "But then, in stepped an engineering firm with a different approach, one that would provide the necessary service and at the same time be conspicuously absent from the residents' views."

The promise of the distributed system led J4C to invite the engineers who designed the Hilton Head system to James City later this month for a seminar regarding alternatives to huge towers.

"The coalition believes that knowledge of advanced technology to improve wireless communications already used throughout the U.S. could be applied to the entire county and facilitate access for all residents," Kadec said.

Kingsmill executives told residents last year that engineers have found the compound unsuitable for a distributed antennae system.

Want to go? *The special meeting of the Development Review Committee will be held at 4 p.m. this Wednesday, June 18, in Building F of the County Government Complex, off Mounts Bay Road. The J4C seminar is scheduled for 1 p.m. next Wednesday, June 25, in Room C of the James City-Williamsburg Community Center, 5301 Longhill Rd.*

More — Letter 21A, Last Word 15C.

