

August 17, 2022

Baca Grande Water and Sanitation District ("District") Board Statement Regarding Proposed Cell Tower from The Board President

Dear Community Members and Members of the District,

This letter is to address community conversations around local cell phone service and the potential role of the Baca Grande Water and Sanitation District in improving that service. I am writing personally, though also as board president, because the issue has become surprisingly controversial. I feel it will be helpful both to share the facts as I know them, and to respond about how this issue engages us as individual community members.

The request to provide land for a cell tower came to the District board in the spring of this year. A cell tower company, Industrial Communications West, was approached by our County Commissioner Tom McCracken, because Commissioner McCracken knew that federal funds (ARPA) could be used for the expansion of broadband access and emergency services. Improving cell service was one of the few ways these funds could be used. Commissioner McCracken knew, especially as a result of Covid, that when children are at home needing to do schoolwork, some may not have access to internet service, but most every home today has access to a cell phone. Improved cell service in our communities will allow these children to do their homework if they have a phone in the house, which they were likely to have.

Also, during this research it became clear that more and more homes have discontinued their landline service, and cell phone is the only way to reach many households. As a result, the county Sheriff's office, emergency dispatch, and similar public entities support improved cell service in our area. Additionally, some people believe that, with the steep decline in landline use, it is only a matter of time before Consolidated Communications will discontinue area landline service entirely because of the limited number of subscribers in our community.

The cell company driving the tower under consideration by the District is Viaero. Industrial West specializes in low elevation towers that serve Viaero's rural network. The Viaero technology would also improve service for AT&T users. For Verizon service to be improved, a separate Verizon antenna would have to be collocated on the tower. This presumably would happen at a later date after the Viaero antenna is installed.

The proposed tower is to be 195 feet tall. At this height it does not require lighting, but it is high enough to offer significant improvement of service quality in our area. Additional antennas, such as a Verizon antenna, would be placed lower on the tower than the first antenna. The District has a precedent of providing land for towers, most notably the Ciello tower, also located at the Aspen Treatment plant property.

Many people have raised objections to the possibility of a cell tower and have objected to even having this community conversation. I believe this is an important conversation for us to have

collectively. I believe that we can also use this conversation as an opportunity to build trust and collective problem-solving skills for future questions. We need to plan our future, and we should prepare for a future of increasingly diverse perspectives and increasingly complex needs. If we do not accept that change is happening, we cannot prepare for it.

One objection to a cell tower is that it will bring 5G to our area. Areas with a rural profile like ours are not candidates for 5G at this time.

Another objection that has been raised is that cell towers emit dangerous radiation that is especially harmful to children. I have read some of the reference materials that individuals have posted to support this concern. What I am reading is that cell towers within ¼ mile of a residence may be harmful to children. At the Aspen Treatment Plant site, by my own calculations using the Saguache County Parcel Viewer, the proposed tower will be approximately the following distances from residential areas:

Colorado College Dorms	0.4 miles
Townhouses.	0.66 miles
Closest point of Chalet I	0.96 miles (e.g. near Nada)
Town of Crestone	1.5 miles
Closest Grants location	1.48 miles
Closest Chalet II location	2.92 miles
Closest Casita Park location	3.16 miles
Farthest south end of the Baca	4.9 miles

After looking at various options, Industrial West felt that the location at the Baca Water Aspen Treatment plant would best serve the overall community because of its location in relation to residences and populations. This location is close enough and centrally located enough to substantively improve cell service to all areas of the Baca Grande, and to the Town of Crestone, while also distant enough to allay concerns about health and visibility. According to Industrial West, the other proposed location near the POA on the McDowell property is less ideal because it is considerably farther away from the needed coverage areas, and will not provide as consistently reliable service to the greatest number of residents.

A third objection to a cell tower has been destruction of our natural views. The current tower at the Aspen location is not readily visible from County Road T or other parts of the Baca Grande or town. I expect we can have a conversation about how to minimize the visual impact of a tower at this location. I expect that we can also create simulations of the proposed visual profile and make an informed decision about the visual impact. My own evaluations suggest that the tower at the proposed location will not substantially impact the viewshed for most residents and visitors.

A fourth objection to the cell tower is that the District should not be operating outside of its purview as a provider of water and sewer services by moving into the business of cell towers. The objection is that this endeavor would be or is already a distraction from our primary

mission. The District is acting here as the property owner only, with an opportunity to have a revenue benefit that will extend to every member of the District. The questions and comments received by the District in the last month suggest that people do not trust that the District is a service entity that works in the public interest. I can assure you that we are exploring this request solely as it will benefit our membership and the District. We are a volunteer board and your fellow community members. We work rigorously to ensure that the District is doing its very best for its customers and keeping rates as low as possible. The District is looking at future expenses for infrastructure improvements in the millions of dollars. Our low population density means that we must look at every opportunity to deliver essential services in a cash poor environment. This budget management priority will be a concern for decades, not just a few years. Admittedly, the tower itself is not likely to bring substantial revenue to the district, but if we can use this opportunity to come together as a community and have a conversation that addresses the complex realities of your future, the process will create pathways that will benefit us moving forward.

A fifth objection we received was the chosen format of Zoom for the public information session. The objection was that Zoom is not available to certain members of the community, or that people cannot as freely communicate on that forum. The District chose Zoom for a number of reasons: The District does not have facilities to accommodate large groups, especially in the age of Covid. Also Covid has been a persistent problem affecting the District work force, and staff safety is a primary concern of the District. It did not seem prudent or within our expertise to organize a large in-person group gathering. We will continue to engage in the information gathering and dissemination process while avoiding large in-person gatherings, and we will use all productive information exchange processes reasonably available to us and that do not unreasonably tax our staff and resources.

One consideration that has not been raised in the conversation around health concerns is that our community currently receives cell service from Moffat, where the only tower is located a few hundred feet from the Moffat School. There has been no discussion about whether this Moffat tower should be disabled or altered to reduce risk to our children. Cell service to our community rightly should not add health risks in our neighbor communities and to our own children. Long-term community planning should involve phasing out such placements if they are a health risk. It is my understanding that the Moffat tower is also 195 feet tall. It is an example of the proposed height. Increased use of the Moffat tower by an expanding population will and has already led to a decline in service availability in outlying areas. If we do not improve local service, we can expect a decline in coverage in our area.

This industry is highly regulated. Any tower will require National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Federal, and local approvals, and will need to undergo foundation & structural analyses- to include soils testing, surveys, FAA determinations, etc., before carriers will collocate on any tower. Industrial West is experienced in gaining these approvals and building these structures. This approach to hire an expert in the field of cell tower construction and management has a high likelihood of success if chosen, with a likelihood of the best possible service, the greatest number of options in terms of location, and the greatest likelihood of

achieving required certifications and collocation of several providers on the tower, and construction in a timely manner.

I have to admit that I was taken aback, perhaps naively so, by the suspicion and adversarial energy behind responses to the announcement by the District of the possibility of the tower. It does not feel good to be personally maligned on Facebook by people who do not know me, but who I consider to be my neighbors. Please remember that we are together in this, all doing our best. Please talk to us before accusing us. And please re-read your words before pressing send. Ask yourself whether your intentions are straightforward and kind. Please know that your public servants and service providers strive to choose the path of kindness, and that we are human, too. As board president, I believe the District needs to focus on communication and community engagement to increase trust with our membership. Trust and communication are essential to problem solving, and to the effective management of our community systems.

There is considerable misinformation about the role of the county in considering a cell tower. Commissioner McCracken is deeply committed to this community and has been working hard to create opportunities for residents of our county. Again, please ask questions before attacking his intentions and integrity.

Those of us who live in the Crestone/Baca Grande community have adapted our lives and probably overwhelmingly are okay with either decision, whether to have a tower or not to have a tower if that is the right decision for our community. Virtually every one of us has moved here to make a better life for ourselves. We came rejecting certain values, and believing in a better future. Many of us consciously came for peace and healing. Others have subconsciously benefited from the peace and healing afforded by this place. We bring our dreams and ideals. We come here to make a better world.

This board respects and admires the diverse people and passions that come together in the Crestone/Baca Grande community. We strive to listen, to make decisions that are reasonable, realistic, practical, and with the best interests of the widest swath of the community in mind. The approach of the District is to look at the big picture, and to try to bring the community to a considered decision, taking into account both individual community member desires and critical long-term infrastructure needs.

The decision of whether the Water District will participate in a cell tower plan was to start with a community information session. Many people seemed to think that the public information session was an indication that the District had already made a decision on the issue. This is not the case. We set the meeting as part of an information exchange process. The ensuing calls, emails, letters to the District, conversations on Facebook, and petitions have given the District a clear sense of the need for increased trust and for continued conversation. The August 24th community information session will be an opportunity for the representative from Industrial West to present, and for the district to share information about options for the community and the District. We look forward to a productive and civil exchange.

Ultimately, the District Board will vote on whether to enter an agreement with Industrial West to place a cell tower on District property. This is not a decision that should be made as a result of public pressure or lobbying of interest groups representing a small segment of our population. The best plan will come as a result of civil discourse. I encourage members of the District to be open to the many options for our future, to work together, and to listen before passing judgment. Please attend our meetings. We need members of the community willing to give their time and to learn about the issues facing the District.

I hope this letter answers some of your questions, and opens the door for continued conversations about how to build a better community. Thank you to each of you for your care for Crestone, and for the hope that you bring for our collective future.

Sincerely,

Vivia Lawson
President
Board of Directors
Baca Grande Water & Sanitation District