

Cell Tower Board Zoom final event Statement

August 24, 2022

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 Tower West, has been interested in providing service in the Crestone/Baca Grande community for a number of years. The drive for improved cell service is driven by the cell phones that the large majority of us own. Many of us are used to dropped calls and limited coverage, but our infrastructure relies on these technologies more than we may realize. This is especially true of emergency services, which are largely connected by the cellular network.

Many interlinking authorities govern, or at times are not allowed to limit, whether a tower will be installed. If the District should decide to allow a proposal to advance, Industrial West would still have to gain Federal approval based on the tower proximity to the wildlife refuge, it would have to get many construction certifications, and the plan would have to be approved by the county Planning Commission, County Commissioners, and a public hearing would have to take place. The public hearing is when the community officially makes comment on this matter. All of these entities work together to ensure our community functions.

By bringing this conversation forth, the Water & Sanitation District is in no way endorsing any proposal or plan for a cell tower. In fact, if the board should vote to allow an easement on our property, it is not an endorsement of the plan. Many other checks and balances allow the community to weigh in the approval process. We are, however, bringing to the public this opportunity for consideration, because this is an important conversation for us to have collectively. Despite the strong activist reaction against any tower, we are providing this information because we felt the community would be interested. The distraction to our daily work is real, and we will only move forward if there is a clear justification and ideally meaningful community support.

In the course of community conversation, one longtime community member and parent sent me a very thoughtful letter on the matter. This individual made several important observations that rise as possible universal guiding principles for community decision making:

First—our decisions should be local. This is a current political principal, but in order for this to work, we need an informed community, and we need information exchange processes. This may be the only reason that the District decided to have this meeting tonight. We need exchange and participation of our community.

Unfortunately, on the matter of infrastructure questions, governance almost always is a partnership among local, county, state, and federal interests and standards. The issue with cell towers is that the local community does not trust standards accepted at higher levels of government. This conversation tonight is about how and when it is prudent to rebel against these standards.

Second—and these are all points in this very thoughtful letter—The argument about children needing to have cell access to do homework did not resonate for this parent. Her concern is that cell phones are destructive to children from an educational perspective. They create distraction and parents have a huge challenge managing their children’s exposure to internet content. This parent pointed to the large number of homeschooled children in our community, and that internet service provides all the technology needed locally.

This is a complex issue, and so far I have not met anyone who can speak knowledgeably and cogently about all of the factors. And please know that I am not and do not claim to be knowledgeable. I am here to allow for the conversation to happen.

One objection to a cell tower is that it will bring 5G to our area. It is true that any cell tower with FCC approvals will adopt standardized technologies as they become available.

Another objection that has been raised is that cell towers emit dangerous radiation that is especially harmful to children. Distance is a mitigating factor in health concerns, and many studies consider that a distance of ¼ mile from a residence is sufficient to provide safety. Other studies see that this buffer is not needed. Other people believe that any distance will still create harm. A cell tower will adhere to FCC standards of safety, which are generally accepted as appropriate. Because of the particular sensitivities of this community, the location at our Aspen Wastewater treatment plant mitigates a large portion of these concerns because of its relative distance from activity and residential centers.

About distances:

A tower at the Aspen Treatment Plant site will be closest to the Colorado College dorms, almost ½ mile away. The Townhouses 0.66 miles away, the closest point of Chalet I will be just short of a mile from the tower. 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 Tower felt that the location at the District 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.

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 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 our future, the process will create pathways that will benefit us moving forward.

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.

Industrial Tower 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.

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 towers for Ciello and for Consolidated Communications. The Ciello tower is located at our Aspen Wastewater Treatment plant near the proposed location for the cell tower.

The excavation work on Wagon Wheel by SLVREC is unrelated to the cell phone issue. It likewise is unrelated to the property owners' association.

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

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 swathe of the community in mind. The approach of the District is to guide the community to considered decisions, taking into account both individual community member desires and critical long-term infrastructure needs. 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.

I encourage members of the District to be open to the many options for our future and to work together. We need your involvement and participation to address our many challenges. Please attend our meetings. We need community members willing to give their time and to learn about the issues facing the District.

I hope this meeting will open 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.