

Dear Senate Finance Committee Members;

My town is a blend of recreational, commercial and historic attractions. Underpinning these attractions for residents and visitors alike is the beauty of our natural surroundings; the unobstructed mountain views, historic landmarks and by-ways, recreation in areas unspoiled by industrial intrusion. Invariably, these telecom proposals threaten core attributes that make our town desirable.

Since 2023, Manchester has faced three major cell tower applications, including a recently approved application for four canister mounted antennas. These proposals are characterized by a blatant disregard for our Town Plan's zoning and ordinances prohibiting cell towers in Residential and Mixed Use areas. They routinely exceed permitted height and are sited to ensure maximum visual blight.

The following examples show how difficult and frustrating the process currently is for Vermonters opposing these proposals.

In March, 2023, AT&T sought to construct a 140-ft tower off of Side Rd, in the heart of downtown Manchester, a very visible location. AT&T struck a deal with the landowner to site the tower on his land in a residential district, also close to the west branch of the Battenkill River. This residential area consists of mobile homes, many owned and leased by the landowner. The tenants were in no position to oppose this project. Both the zone and 140-ft height were prohibited by the town. A petition to oppose this project was signed by 250 residents. AT&T withdrew their application after a community meeting with our Selectboard and Planning Commission showed an overwhelming majority were opposed.

In the pending case of Verizon's Hunter Park application, which was recently denied by the PUC, there's the same disregard. The site is zoned Mixed Use 2 which prohibits telecommunication towers. The 140-ft height would exceed the permitted height of 130-ft. This location is close to a mobile home community, the Red Fox Community School, the Riley Rink skating facility and the popular historic Rail Trail used by hikers, bikers, dog walkers etc.. Hunter Park hosts outdoor summer concerts, sports events, children's summer camps, charitable events and winter skating. A cell tower at this location would be visible for miles from every view shed. A petition opposing this project has 450 signatures. Both the Planning Commission and Select Board unanimously opposed it. In a spirit of cooperation, our Planning Commission hired an outside propagation expert to determine gaps in coverage and to identify alternative sites.

I understand our need to improve cell service in underserved areas. Mobile phone connectivity is important for safety purposes, and improving communication for first responders is key. However, a spokesperson for the Manchester Police Department said their communications were perfectly adequate.

It's also unclear what defines "de-minimus", a label used in the 248a process. De-minimus suggests something on a smaller scale, yet these recent 140-ft cell tower applications are considered "de-minimus".

What is meant by "substantial deference"? Those who craft our Town Plan put much thought and effort into establishing zoning and ordinances to protect and improve the quality of life for our community. These multinational telecom companies show no regard for our carefully crafted Town Plan and the qualities that define Manchester. Why don't these companies review town plans prior to submitting an application for a CPG? It's time to sunset 248a for good as it is not serving Vermonters interests.

It's also worth noting, the FCC has not complied with a 2021 DC Circuit court order to review and update their obsolete 1996 radio-frequency exposure limits. If the FCC, which is not a health agency, were to conduct a thorough safety review in conjunction with the HHS, the current exposure levels would be deemed grossly inadequate and dangerous. They far surpass what is allowed In Europe, Russia, China and many other countries. The US is an outlier.

At a minimum, telecom companies should site projects with a setback of 1500-ft from any human habitation.

Thank you for addressing this critical subject. Please uphold the power of self-determination so important to our communities by honoring the vision and hard work involved in Town Planning. Improved connectivity can be accomplished in ways that encourage cooperation and respect for all involved.

Sincerely,

Martine Victor  
Manchester