

Opinion Piece/Column

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Old Cell Towers Protect Our Health and Safety

Changes to municipal code could threaten region's wireless coverage

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Background

San Diego is home to the largest cluster of wireless companies in the world and a growing wireless health cluster of innovation. This burgeoning industry is comprised of over 200 companies and is therefore a vital part of our local economy.

The City of San Diego's cultivation of wireless technologies has far-reaching impacts well beyond the San Diego region. Indeed, wireless solutions developed here are in established day-to-day use throughout the globe and in an untold number of fields. Wireless is integral both for vital emergency and business communications, as well as disaster response and health-related monitoring activities. The San Diego community depends on a robust wireless network to be a global player and to support local vital communications infrastructure.

In 2007, the City of San Diego amended its local ordinance governing the review and approval process for wireless communications facilities located within the City. One of the primary outcomes of this amendment was the requirement for wireless carriers to minimize the visual impacts of both new and existing wireless facilities by hiding facilities in faux trees, bell towers or behind roof parapets.

Concerns have been raised with respect to the impact that the revised ordinance will have on the region's existing "legacy" facilities (wireless facilities built 10 or even 20 years ago) which form the backbone of a number of carriers' wireless networks. While wireless carriers are able to comply with the current policy for deployment of new sites, modifying legacy sites to satisfy the revised ordinance's renewed focus on aesthetics is extremely difficult.

Bringing existing legacy sites into compliance with the current standards may require a significant reduction in the height of the facility or removal of the facilities in their entirety, either of which would demonstrably result in a significant decrease in coverage for the region.

In response to concerns raised by wireless carriers and other community and business stakeholders at large, Mayor Jerry Sanders requested that a Wireless Communication Facilities Policy Stakeholders Review Committee (SRC) be established to review the City's current wireless regulations with an eye toward ascertaining the adverse impact of wireless site removals and to develop recommendations for modifications to the municipal code that would better balance the desire to minimize visual impacts with the need to maintain and improve wireless coverage

CONNECT's Role

A strong wireless network is essential to the San Diego innovation community. Any limitations placed on San Diego's wireless networks will have a detrimental impact on the region's ability to utilize wireless solutions and our ability to stay competitive as a business center. As a voice for the San Diego innovation community, CONNECT has joined a coalition of industry leaders to provide guidance on amending the current ordinance to support public safety applications integral to the safety and welfare of the City, to support the evolution of new wireless technologies, and to advance San Diego's economic position in the global marketplace.

Effects on San Diego Businesses

Established businesses rely increasingly on wireless technology both to communicate with their employees and customers and as a means of data communication for a host of information services, such as vehicle-tracking, deliveries, inventory and other logistical operations. In order for these companies to stay competitive in the global marketplace, we must have a robust regional wireless network.

The start-up community is even more reliant on wireless services. Small companies utilize the economies of virtual offices to operate competitively, relying heavily on wireless capabilities to support their core business functions and accommodate growth. A limited wireless network will have severe detrimental consequences for this community.

Effects on San Diego's Emerging Wireless and Wireless-Enabled Health Technologies

In addition to supporting logistical business operations, wireless technology has created a new market for wireless-based applications and services, thereby creating new opportunity for San Diego based companies. In the past two years, CONNECT has mentored over twenty wireless start-up companies. Each CONNECT-mentored company contributes \$3 million to the San Diego economy per year and hires 100% more employees. The importance of wireless networks will continue to grow as more of these new technologies depend on a reliable wireless infrastructure on which to operate.

Case in point: wireless advances have become a priority in health-related innovations. Within the past decade, medicine has seen increased integration of wireless devices and communications in medical monitoring and other wireless health applications. These systems depend on reliable wireless networks to relay, for example, heart rate measurements for people at risk of heart attack and glucose levels for persons with diabetes. Wireless health monitoring systems also communicate patients' vitals in ambulatory transport, ICU or outpatient situations.

Businesses involved in wireless health systems include San Diego-based companies such as Triage Wireless (developing a platform for wireless body-worn patient monitoring) and CardioNet (a wireless medical technology company with a focus on the diagnosis and monitoring of cardiac arrhythmias). With healthcare reform at the top of the federal agenda, the demand for new and improved wireless health technologies will undoubtedly increase. San Diego has the opportunity to lead the nation in this effort. Currently, CONNECT is actively mentoring three companies with new wireless health technologies: Santech (developing wireless and mobile tool platforms for behavioral research such as heart rate monitors), Zoetronics Technology, Inc (manufacturing vital signal processing chipsets for the homecare industry), and Senselab Technology, Inc. (designing ultra-precision thermometry products via wireless technology). New wireless health technologies such as these will require a stable wireless network to support their most basic operation.

Effects on San Diego's Public Safety and Defense Systems

Police, fire and ambulance systems depend on wireless communication systems everyday in responding to emergencies where communication—on both the responder's and the caller's sides—is critical. Safety applications such as the police department's Treo Smartphone Deployment and the fire department's Visnet Mobile require wireless to function. Moreover, much of the technology employed by first responders charged with responding to natural or manmade disasters is wireless. For example, at a recent Mayor's Roundtable on Homeland Security, the Chief of Police expressed a need for more wireless technology to monitor illicit border-activity and terrorist attacks.

At the core of every progressive city lies the need for its inhabitants to feel safe and secure in their environment. Today, wireless communication systems fill an integral role in preventing crime, counteracting natural disasters, serving the day-to-day law enforcement needs vital to maintaining the public welfare and our ability as citizens to contact 911 or call for assistance via wireless should an emergency occur.

CONNECT will monitor the progress of the SRC and continue to help educate the committee on the critical role that wireless communications play in the San Diego community.