Tower raises prospect of better cell coverage



JULIE HOWLE / Staff

Ted Jarvis, a Realtor with Table Rock Realty, checks his cell phone's signal strength inside the office along State 11. Jarvis said his phone can't pick up a signal at the office or at home and he would welcome improvements to coverage.

Residents who have worried about poor signals pleased by new additions

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PICKENS — Another cell phone tower has been approved to go up near State 11, reigniting the debate between those wanting improved cell coverage and safety and those hoping to protect the natural beauty of the area in northern Pickens County.

For local resident Eddie Roach, one word can sum up his cell coverage around the State 11 area — awful.

Help would be welcome for Roach, who lives off of the scenic highway near Pickens.

"If it works, I think it would be great," Roach said. "To me, I think it's very important because this is where I work also."

The Pickens County Planning Commission has approved the application for a wireless communication tower at 183 Hickory Hollow Road, which is south of State 11 and north of Table Rock Road.



"What they're trying to work on here is the area from Table Rock Road up to highway 11," said Jonathan Yates, an attorney with Nexsen Pruet law firm representing Optima Towers.

"They're trying to infill that area and provide adequate voice and advanced data coverage," he said.

Yates said it will be a 250-foot tower and said they "easily" meet the setbacks and buffers required for the project.

He said the area doesn't have adequate wireless infrastructure.

"What we can do is not only provide voice and advanced data to folks in that area but effective access to 911, first responders, fire, police, EMS," Yates said. "We've become the principal way that folks correspond with the 911 service."

Chris Brink, community development director for the county, said the tower is designed to have space for up to five carriers.

He said a cell tower was approved last month at 129 Woodport Drive in Pickens for Optima as well, which is also in northern Pickens County.

Sharon Stark, who owns property on Hickory Hollow Road, told planning commissioners before the vote on the Hickory Hollow tower that she hoped they would keep in mind "protecting and preserving the natural beauty of Pickens County and also the environmental quali-

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ty."

"I trust that you'll consider the impact of where this tower is going up and that you'll be clear on the location and that there would not be a better location for a tower to be," she said, describing how balloon or other testing could be done.

Yates said the tower will be on a three-and-a-half acre piece of property and said the property owner has leased Optima a 100-by-100 area for the facility, where an 80-by-80 area will be enclosed with a fence.

He said the facility has good tree cover and distance off Hickory Hollow Road.

"We have all the things to sort of shield it from the surrounding area," he said.

"It covers the area in the best way possible," Yates said. "As always with towers, we're not going to please everybody, but what we're trying to please is the greater good."

Ted Jarvis, a Realtor with Table Rock Realty, said cell coverage is "terrible" in the area and said he thinks improvements for the coverage are needed.

"I have a cell phone that I can't pick up here on and I can't pick up at home on either," said Jarvis, who works in the office on State 11 and lives in the Eastatoe Valley.

"In fact, I have to through the day use the landline to dial my cell phone number to check for voicemails," he said. "And then we transfer our calls at night to our cell phones, so I have to do the same thing at home."

Service is reasonable at work and at home for Brett Deming, owner of The Blue Ridge Outfitter along State 11, but he said the tower could benefit hikers.

"It really doesn't affect me here, but once you head into the gorges or up on the Foothills Trail, some of the emergency communication is a little more difficult," Deming said.

He said he and others have had to climb onto ridgelines, getting off the trail and climbing as high as they can, to get service to call out in an emergency.

"I definitely think it will help folks out," he said. "I know folks who struggle with it here, other storekeepers even."

Fred Anthony, EMS director for Pickens County, said he thinks improvements are needed in coverage in the area.

"If you have an emergency up there yourself, you are able to use your cell phone to call in," Anthony said.

"Secondly, we use cell phones on the ambulances so that helps us," he said. "We use the cell phones on the ambulance for voice communication, but we also use it for transmitting 12-lead EKGs to the emergency department."

Construction on the tower along Hickory Hollow Road is expected to start in the first quarter of next year, according to Martin Deputy, construction manager for the project.

Yates said he thinks construction for the Woodport Drive tower will start at about the same time.