

Tiny cell towers could be a boon for OP

Antennas would be affixed to light posts and village property

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"Hello? Can you hear me? How about now? Is that better? Let me try calling you back on a landline."

Such frustrations with cell phone reception could soon be a thing of the past due to a plan by the village of Oak Park to rent space to cell phone providers on some village-owned street lights and buildings to install small cell antennas.

The Village Board of Trustees entered an agreement last week with Northbrook-based Wireless Bridge Partners to contract with cell phone companies to provide the space.

Village Manager Cara Pavlicek said in a telephone interview that the small cell phone towers are common in large shopping malls and convention centers, but cell phone companies are beginning to install the devices in municipalities across the country.

It's uncertain to tell how much revenue such a deal would generate, Pavlicek said, but the agreement signed last week would send 65 percent of the funds to the village and 35 percent to Wireless Bridge Partners, with a cap not to exceed \$100,000 annually.

She said the population density in Oak Park warrants the additional coverage, especially considering the potential for hundreds of new residents to begin populating residential developments planned for the downtown area.

"As cellular phone service demands increase we want to make sure we have good coverage in the community," she said.

Pavlicek said she expects the devices to be placed largely near commercial corridors.

Bud Blinick, owner of Wireless Bridge Partners, approached the village with the proposal last summer.

Blinick primarily has worked as a real estate broker, but he said working with cell companies to rent space on the light poles and public buildings is a similar concept.

"What we've found is a lot of municipalities have good locations for towers and antennas, but they weren't getting a fair share of the revenue for the rent," he said.

He said that as wireless devices have become more prevalent, they have clogged up signals sent from traditional cell towers and created dead zones in areas like Lake Street.

The antennas are about the size of a notebook, Blinick said, and virtually unnoticeable. They are "camouflaged and wrapped around the light posts" in a cone-like shape or affixed to the side public buildings.

The additional coverage the antennas provide range from about 500 to 1,000 feet, Blinick said.

He declined to discuss how much the village stands to gain from such a deal, because Wireless Bridge Partners will have to negotiate each deal with each cell phone provider individually.

Each antenna would be installed by one of the four cell phone providers — AT&T, Verizon, Sprint and T-Mobile — so light poles and buildings could potentially have multiple antennas. Each carrier could install 20 to 40 "nodes," so as many as 160 could be headed to Oak Park.

Village Attorney Paul Stephanides described the deal as a pilot project with a two-year term. That gives village officials time to evaluate the market and the service provided by Wireless Bridge Partners.

The agreement also notes that in addition to light poles, the small cell antennas could be installed on Village Hall, the Public Works Service Center, fire stations, pumping stations, Dole Library and various village-owned parking garages.

Blinick said he hopes to have a proposal to the village in the next three to six months.

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