

Cell phone Antennas in Residential Neighborhoods: In Search of a Sensible Policy

[Skip to How You Can Help \(Petitions, etc.\)](#)

Imagine you arrive home one day to find that the city street light in front of or near your house in your quiet cul-de-sac now has two or three silver flat panels bulging out from the pole, about 7/8 of the way up, making up a radio frequency cell phone antenna. Need to see a picture? See, <http://kmttool.net/cellantennas.htm>. Maybe you never loved the way the street light looked in the first place, since it wasn't very quaint, but it fit in nicely with the neighborhood and was generally accepted as a "residential" fixture. Besides, you need the light for safety.

But an antenna! More than you bargained for when you bought the house. Could this really happen, you ask? Yes. It's already happened to some residents in San Diego much to their surprise. And if the citizens of San Diego don't spend a little time on this soon, it is going to start happening more and more. Street lights are in what the city calls the "right of way". That means the city, not you, generally decides what can and can't happen there.

The city is in the process of approving cell phone antennas on street lights next to houses. Proposed regulations and Policy documents that sanction and even encourage this behavior are being reviewed by the City Attorney as we speak and are planned to go into effect in June/July 04 pending City Council approval. This means more and more antennas will be approved in residential areas. The decisions are being made one by one without a cumulative plan whatsoever for the community. We need to make sure our local Planning Boards are well aware that we intend to work hard to protect the property values of our homes and the cumulative visual impact to our neighborhoods.

The Current Situation

Cell phone technology has now advanced to the stage where antennas can be fit on to traffic lights or street lights (they still need to put a lot of bulky equipment nearby, which they put in vaults, either at ground level or under ground). Combine this with the ever growing demand for cell phone coverage in residential areas and one can see why there is a push for these types of installations and why they will become more and more frequent in the near future.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 governs the states, counties and city's ability to regulate the installation of cell phone antennas. We all want and need cell phone coverage and our Federal Government did not want cities to make

rules so restrictive as to indirectly ban cell phone antennas completely. For example, a city ordinance can not say “no antennas within a mile of a residence” if, in effect, that would mean a complete ban on antennas in the city. However, the city does have the right to regulate “the placement, construction, and modification” of these installations. Under this provision, other cities have established policies and ordinances establishing protections such as a heavy burden of proof for residential installations, 500 ft setbacks from single family homes and fairly detailed planting and reduction of visual impact requirements.

The city is currently working on a new policy that will help it process all the requests it receives from cell phone companies to install antennas. However, the new policy is not going to prohibit the installation of antennas in residential neighborhoods it’s in fact going to recommend these installations and make it relatively easy to do. Applications for non-residential use in a residential zone can be approved by a city employee (City project manager) after reviewing the application and notifying anyone living within 300 feet of the antenna. The decision can then be appealed to the City Planning Commission. To the credit of the City’s administrative staff, they generally try to hear and address the concerns of everyone involved. To the Telco Companies (Telephone companies) credit, they too are trying to work with everyone involved. However, as is the case in all politics, there are those with power and those without it. Put another way, we are all equal, but some of some of us are a little more equal than others.

Because residents living next to street lights are not aware of the situation until and unless it happens to them and because it is happening one by one instead of as an overall plan discussed and debated in large public forums, residents have not had a chance to voice their concerns to the City Councilmen who will approve the new regulations and policy. By default, street lights are being selected for these installations because they are perceived by the city and politicians to be the path of least resistance.

A Better Solution

There is a better solution. Traffic lights are located throughout residential neighborhoods. They are expected to be unattractive to residents living nearby, a necessary evil. Since they already damage the immediate environment and have a visual impact with light, vertical poles and bulky equipment the incremental damage caused by adding an antenna to those already living near a traffic light is far less than to those living near a street light. At an intersection with traffic lights there are already at least four poles vs. only one for a street light and many traffic lights contain cameras and other equipment as well. The affect on the property values of the homes nearby and the visual impact to those living in the vicinity of a traffic light is not nearly as damaging as it would be to the homeowners who might have a single street light near their front or back yards.

In addition, most residences near traffic lights/intersections are set back greater distances than homes typically are from street lights so the numbers of homeowners affected by the traffic light installation are fewer.

Finally, the city already has cell phone antennas installed on traffic lights at two locations near Torrey Pines Road in La Jolla. These sites serve as an example that not only can the antennas be placed on the traffic lights, but in at least two occasions the City felt it was the right thing to do.

As for the Telco's, they prefer the traffic lights as well, since installations on traffic lights effect less people (i.e. potential customers) and may be every bit as workable for them.

The Need For Help From Our Representatives

So why is the city channeling these installations on to street lights instead of traffic lights? Quite simply, when the application comes in from the Telco to put the antenna on a traffic light, the transportation department says no. To date no direct explanations of their objections have been documented. Others in the city have speculated about their reasons. Certainly it will cause them to do some work. They will need to take down the traffic pole and put it back up. (Something they'll have to do with a street light as well) They may need to stop traffic at the intersection overnight, something they may need to do with a street light. In the future, if maintenance needs to be done on the antennas, they may need to close the intersection overnight. Most of these intersections are in residential areas where the impact of such a closure at night is minimal. Any costs of a closure could be covered by the monthly fees the Telco pays to rent space on the pole.

It appears the Transportation department is saying no, because it can, rather than taking the time to work through whatever issues they might have so that traffic lights could be used. The Politicians and the transportation department must remember that they represent the citizens of the city of San Diego. If it is in our best interest to have these installations on the traffic lights then that is where they should be put. It is understandable that they take the current position, since they don't realize the effect they are having on residents and no one with any authority has yet made an effort to explain it to them.

This is a call for our politicians to take the appropriate steps so the transportation department can do the right thing for the citizens of San Diego.

The Time to Save Your Home Is Now

Don't think this issue affects someone else. Nobody knows what the Telco's are planning. The city does not require them to submit a comprehensive plan. They simply take applications for each site one at a time. The information submitted by the Telco's is not even verified, just reviewed for any obvious errors.

City council members, such as Scott Peters, are working on the issue right now. We're trying to get the Mayor's office to take a more active role in this effort as well. They've requested a review from the City Manager's Office that the Transportation department will respond to. Now is the time to let them know how you feel. Once it becomes generally accepted that traffic lights are off limits and street lights are the best solution you will have no way to prevent a cell phone antenna from arriving on the street light near your front or back lawn in the next few months let alone one, two, or five years from now. They can use a street light within 50 feet or less of your home – literally in front or behind your home.

How you can help

Sign Petitions

- Sign a petition regarding residential cell antennas at <http://www.PetitionOnline.com/antennas/petition.html> and another on property value affects at <http://www.petitiononline.com/property/petition.html>

Make Some Calls &/Or E-mails

- Call or e-mail your city council person. Tell them you want the City Transportation Department to change their position on Traffic Lights and request a cumulative plan. (See full list of Council Members at bottom of the page for your district phone number and e-mail address. Sample e-mails you can cut and paste into a note are included at the bottom of the e-mail note that was sent with this white paper.)
- Call the Mayors office and ask to speak to your District's representative. Tell them you want the City Transportation Department to change their position and ask them to write up a formal request to the City Manager's Office for a review on this issue (619-236-6330)
- Call the City Project Manager for Cell Antennas and let her know how you feel, Karen Lynch Ashcroft – 619-446-5351
- Speak to your local planning board: for Carmel Valley see <http://www.cvsd.com/Groups/index.html> for a list

Jennie & Stuart Starr
Carmel Valley Residents (Mayfield Neighborhood near Del Mar Heights Road.)
starrj@pacbell.net

Full List of City Council Members:

District 1 – Scott Peters - Telephone: (619) 236-6611, From North County (858)484-3808, Fax: (619) 236-6999, E-Mail: ScottPeters@sandiego.gov
Carmel Valley, Torrey Hills, Torrey Pines, Del Mar Mesa, La Jolla, Rancho Penasquitos, Torrey Highlands, University City

District 2 – Michael Zucchet – Telephone: (619) 236-6622, Fax: (619) 236-6996, E-Mail: mzucchet@sandiego.gov
La Jolla, Little Italy, Midway, Mission Beach, Mission Hills, Ocean Beach, Old Town, Pacific Beach, Point Loma/Penninsula, Uptown Park West

District 3 – Toni Atkins – Telephone: (619) 236-6633, Fax: (619) 595-1481
Email: toniatkins@sandiego.gov
Burlingame, City Heights, Hillcrest, Kensington, Mid-City, Normal Heights, North Park, South Park, Talmadge, University Heights and Uptown, all of Balboa Park, and the northernmost portion of Golden Hill.

District 4 – Charles Lewis - Telephone: (619) 236-6644, Fax: (619) 236-7273, Email: cllewis@sandiego.gov
Click here for community list: <http://genesis.sannet.gov/infospc/templates/cd4/communities.jsp>

District 5 – Brian Maienschein – Telephone: (619) 236-6655 or (858) 673-5304, Fax: (619) 238-0915, E-Mail: bmaienschein@sandiego.gov
Carmel Mountain Ranch, Mira Mesa, Rancho Bernardo, Sabre Springs, San Pasqual, Scripps Ranch, and Sorrento Mesa

District 6 – Donna Frye – Telephone: (619) 236-6616, Fax: (619) 236-7329, E-mail: donnafrye@sandiego.gov
Bay Ho, Bay Park, Birdland, De Anza, Clairemont, Kearny Mesa, Linda Vista, Mission Bay Park, Mission Valley, Mission Village, Morena and Serra Mesa.

District 7 – Jim Maddafer – Telephone: 619-236-6677, Fax: 619-238-1360, E-mail: jmaddaffer@sandiego.gov
Allied Gardens, Chollas Creek, Colina del Sol, Darnall, Del Cerro, El Cerrito Heights, Fox Canyon, Grantville, Islenair, Miramar MCAS, Mission Gorge, Murphy Canyon, Rolando, San Carlos, SDSU College Area, Tierrasanta and portions of Oak Park. District Seven also includes Lake Murray and Mission Trails Regional Park (MTRP).

District 8 – Ralph Inzunza - Telephone: (619) 236-6688, Fax: (619) 231-7918
E-Mail: rinzunza@sandiego.gov
San Ysidro, Otay Mesa, Otay Mesa and Nestor, Memorial Stockton, Logan Heights, Grant Hill, Golden Hill, West Nestor, Tijuana River Valley, Southcrest, Sherman Heights, Barrio Logan