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Cell towers now hide in plain sight

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As she drove by Winnetka Covenant Church on her way to work, Loretta Livingston noticed the new steeple under construction, never guessing what lay hidden beneath its soaring white exterior.

Topped with a tiny cross, the recently completed 120-foot steeple concealed an array of antennas that allow four wireless companies to transmit cellular phone signals.

"I thought it was taking them an awful long time to put it up," said Livingston, who works at a Wilmette day school.

With cell towers proliferating across the national landscape, resistance from communities has forced many towers to go undercover. Some are concealed within grain silos or attached to street lights and chimneys. Others are disguised as flag poles, large boulders, even palm trees.

The stealthy effort using church steeples has been especially pronounced, with one proposal in Northbrook dubbed the "bell tower cell tower."

Such concealment strategies, relatively common on the East and West Coasts, are on the rise across the Chicago area, as residents often reject the unsightly towers, which typically range in height from 30 to 200 feet.

In California and Florida, some cell towers are fashioned in the shape of palm trees, or on the East Coast, as pines.

"In the beginning, the trees were, to put it politely, not very realistic," said Steve Meyer, business development manager with Tucson-based Larson Camouflage, which has hidden two cell towers in fake grain silos in Gurnee.

"Now you have very realistic trees. If you have a picnic beneath one, you'll know it's fake. But if you're driving by, it tends to blend in," he said.

Industry experts say they find objections to new cell towers especially daunting within affluent areas, where residents demand good phone reception but decry the towers' effect on property values. In suburbs such as Wilmette, where residents once fought the use of

fake fiberglass rocks to hide cable equipment, the "not in my back yard" reaction is typical of most communities, officials said.

"People now are much more sensitive than in the early days of wireless," said James Estes, executive chairman of California-based VelociTel, which recently completed Winnetka Covenant's steeple-tower. "The demand to conceal antennas is increasing dramatically."

The number of cell towers has risen 18 percent every year since 1985, with nearly 175,000 of them peppering the country by 2004, according to an annual survey by the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association, based in Washington.

Churches, for one, have reaped benefits in helping the wireless industry. By welcoming the cell towers, they may earn up to \$3,000 a month or more in lease agreements with telecommunications companies.

Winnetka Covenant, located in an annexed portion of Wilmette, couldn't afford a new steeple until VelociTel picked up the \$225,000 tab. The monthly lease payments, too low to jeopardize the church's tax-exempt status, will help replace the roof, said John Breidenbach, a church member and architect who designed the project, completed about a month ago.

"I did approach the pastor about commemorating the steeple and cupola with the ringing of cell phones," Breidenbach said.

Resident Justin Zubrod, who lives across the street from the church, said he doesn't have a problem with the high-tech steeple.

"It raised a bunch of concerns, no doubt, but these things are popping up everywhere," he said. "When people put up towers, you don't know what will happen."

Yet the gussied-up cell towers fail to impress some residents. Wilmette village officials had planned to examine a Sprint proposal that requested placing a "stealth antenna" at St. Joseph Catholic Church. But anticipating a negative reaction, church officials pulled the request off the agenda, said Jim Liput, business manager for the church.

In Northbrook, Sprint recently withdrew an application to build a 90-foot cell tower at St. Peter United Church of Christ, which would have been hidden by a three-sided structure and faux carillon.

Neighbors complained that it would have looked unsightly, and the village's Plan Commission said the tower exceeded height limitations, said Thomas Poupard, Northbrook's director of community planning.

Poupard said he has found it equally difficult to identify new sites for water towers.

"Some communities paint them blue, to try to make them blend into the sky," he said, adding that many villages solve both problems by hanging cell phone antennas from water towers.

Concealing a cell tower does not come cheap, adding \$100,000 or more to the project, according to a report by the cellular telecommunications association.

And critics complain that more research should be done on the health ramifications of cell towers, especially because they have become so pervasive. The Food and Drug Administration and the wireless industry maintain that the low levels of electromagnetic radiation have not been proved to be harmful to humans.

But Marne Glaser, an Evanston psychologist who has studied the research on cell phone radiation, said some studies have shown biological effects on human and animal tissue and organs.

"Of course the towers are tall, and so it's not the same dose as you'd get from a cell phone," said Glaser, a member of the EMR Network, a national non-profit organization concerned about electromagnetic radiation. "But it is chronic, and you can't hang up on a cell tower. They're 24/7."