

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Up-Island officials look to Nantucket for cell phone tips



A Nantucket electrical pole outfitted with an antenna used to distribute cellular telephone signals.
Photos by Nelson Sigelman

By Nelson Sigelman - August 24, 2006

Representatives of Aquinnah and Chilmark flew to Nantucket Monday morning for a quick tour of that island's distributed antenna system (DAS), which relies on a series of small antennas set on telephone poles to distribute cellular telephone signals.

The up-Island officials wanted to see the antennas first-hand as they contemplate how best to provide improved cellular telephone service in their towns. Erected three years ago, the system used on Nantucket is attractive because it provides an alternative to high towers and could in the future provide a platform for wireless Internet service.

Camille Rose, Aquinnah selectman and chairman of the town planning board, said she wanted to see the antennas and the building used to house the signal base station so she could make a realistic assessment of how the system might lend itself to Aquinnah.

Chilmark selectman Frank Fenner said he was also interested in seeing the layout and hearing about any problems. Mr. Fenner said a DAS system might provide a solution to the problem of providing cell phone service to Menemsha, which now has little or no reception.

Referencing other well-known dead spots, Ms. Rose said a so-called DAS node, or antenna located on the north side and the south side of Aquinnah might provide cellular signal strength to town beaches.



The central base station located near the Nantucket airport houses equipment used to distribute cellular signals along the distributed antenna system.

Also making the morning tour was Aquinnah town administrator Jeff Burgoyne and a Times reporter. Nantucket's official's host was Diane O'Neil, the town's procurement officer.

"It is really not invasive," said Ms. O'Neil as she drove the Vineyard group along Nantucket's roads while pointing out the location of DAS antennas. Ms. Rose was intrigued by the location of one antenna set on top of a pole in a residential district and wondered if the abutters had objected.

They had not. As Ms. O'Neil described the history of DAS on Nantucket, she said the entire system had met with overall acceptance and there was talk about extending the system.

The history of DAS on Nantucket is intertwined with the history of electrical deregulation. National Grid, an international electrical delivery company, acquired Nantucket Electric. Soon after that, a sister company, National Grid Wireless, an infrastructure and service company that provides coverage solutions for cellular companies approached town officials about erecting a DAS system.

Nantucket does have several cellular towers, and company officials are unwilling to reveal exactly how many cellular companies use the DAS system. But island residents interviewed said that in general, cellular telephone service is good in most areas.

In a telephone interview, Alex Gamota, National Grid Wireless general manager, said the Nantucket system relies on approximately 30 miles of fiber optic cable and 26 DAS nodes. Depending on topography and equipment a DAS node may have a cellular signal range that extends from one quarter to three quarters of a mile.

For system providers like National Grid Wireless, the viability of DAS comes down to what the cellular customer wants. He said his company would not have built the Nantucket system had there not been customer demand and economic viability.

Recent changes to Aquinnah's bylaws governing cell phone towers and the interest of Chilmark in partnering in a DAS system could provide an incentive for cellular companies that would prefer to cooperate with towns rather than fight in court over a cell tower.

The federal Telecommunication Act of 1996 (TCA) limits the obstacles towns may place in the way of wireless communication companies seeking to provide service where there is a lack of coverage.

In January, Aquinnah voters mounted a multi-pronged effort to take control of the town's wireless

future by creating a wireless overlay district that would allow for the placement of equipment at the town landfill needed to operate a distributed antenna system. The town has also hired David Maxson, a wireless consultant to assist the town with wireless issues.

Other towns with similar concerns are looking to DAS systems to protect scenic vistas and provide cellular service.

In addition to Nantucket, National Grid Wireless also provides DAS in the towns of Andover, Malden, and Hull.

The town of Brookline recently awarded a lease to ClearLinx Services Ltd. to provide DAS even as the town battles T-Mobile and Verizon Wireless in federal court over the companies' plans to erect cell towers.

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