

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Up-Island towns move DAS cell plans forward

By Nelson Sigelman - March 6, 2008

Selectmen in Aquinnah, Chilmark, and West Tisbury last month signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining their agreement to share the costs to facilitate the creation of a distributed antenna system to serve the three up-Island towns.

The towns expect to issue a request for proposals (RFP) by May 1 said Aquinnah town coordinator Jeff Burgoyne. Several companies have already shown an interest in providing a communication infrastructure network for wireless telephone carriers.

A distributed antenna system (DAS) relies on a series of radio access nodes (RAN) connected to small antennas set on telephone poles, or poles erected for that specific purpose, to distribute cellular telephone signals. Although the range is considerably less, the DAS appeals to communities where a high conventional tower is unwelcome but wireless telephone service is poor.

Initially the plan is to have the system include areas with well-known poor cell phone reception, including the Moshup Trail loop in Aquinnah, North Road in Chilmark, Menemsha village and South Road extending to Alley's in West Tisbury.

The one-page memorandum stipulates that the towns will cooperate to issue an RFP, evaluate the responses and work with legal and technical consultants. The expenses will be shared in a process yet to be determined. At the request of West Tisbury, the MOU includes a limit of \$2,500.

Following the successful completion of the contract phase and the selection of a DAS builder the MOU states that the towns will execute a separate agreement covering the governance and oversight of the DAS deployment and business management operations.

The examination of the DAS alternative began in Aquinnah more than two years ago when voters mounted a multi-pronged effort to take control of the town's wireless future and prevent the erection of a tower by creating a wireless overlay district that would allow for the placement of DAS equipment at the town landfill.

Aquinnah then sought to cooperate with Chilmark and West Tisbury. Although the towns could potentially earn some income from a DAS, the selectmen said their goal is to provide better wireless service for residents and visitors, which has a public safety component, and buttress efforts to guard against cell towers.

Camille Rose, chairman of the Aquinnah board of selectmen, described the MOU signed last month as a milestone in the effort to create a DAS. "We are really on our way," she said. "We are working together to accomplish this."

Ms. Rose said extending service along Moshup Trail has an important public safety component because of the popularity of the Land Bank Beach and Philbin Beach.

Chilmark selectman J.B. Riggs Parker, point man for his board on cell phone issues, said the DAS system is promising. "We are looking forward to issuing an RFP to see how much interest there is on the part of providers," he said.

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 some cases cellular companies prefer to cooperate with towns rather than fight in court over a cell tower and opt to use a DAS.

Under the current scenario, a company selected by the towns would pay all the costs of erecting a DAS. That company would then lease its system to major wireless service providers.

Many factors can contribute to the cost of a DAS. In the best scenario, the system provider utilizes existing but unused fiber optic cable, so-called dark cable, and existing telephone poles.

Construction costs rise when the company needs to string new fiber optic cable, erect new poles, and bury lines. Terrain and time of year are factors in signal strength, which may vary from a quarter mile to more than half a mile, according to industry experts. For example, a signal will be stronger when trees are bare of leaves.

An average tower may emit 50 to 100 watts and have a range of five miles. A DAS system uses approximately 10 watts, but signal strength is a two-way street. The user's cell phone, which operates with less than a watt of power, is a miniature transmitter that must also be able to reach the DAS antenna or tower.

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