

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Up-Island towns to benefit from cell deal

By Jack Shea

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Cell phone service and the treasuries of the three up-Island towns may be improved substantially, perhaps as early as next summer. Tuesday, Chilmark selectmen approved the decision of the up-Island distributed antennae system (DAS) committee to accept a DAS proposal from American Tower Corp.

West Tisbury selectmen were expected to follow suit last night. Aquinnah is also expected to endorse the committee's decision. The next step is a contract.

The long-term proposal by American Tower was submitted in response to a request for proposals issued by the DAS committee, made up of one selectman from the three towns.

The proposal includes one-time up-front payments of as much as \$450,000, to be divided equally among the towns and an ongoing but undetermined amount of rental fees.

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.

Crown Castle International of Houston, Texas, was an unsuccessful bidder for the project.

The proposal calls for American Tower to install 25 linked antennae sets or "nodes" on telephone poles in the three towns. American Tower would then lease access to the system to cell phone service providers, such as Verizon and Comcast, to generate the town revenue provided for in the bid.

Under the proposed agreement, the towns would receive 15 percent of rental fees received by American Tower from the first phone service vendor, 20 percent of rental fees from the second vendor and 30 percent of fees for all subsequent vendors. The duration of the contract with American Tower has not been decided, but "it will be a long-term arrangement," Chilmark selectman J.B. Riggs Parker said.

Mr. Parker said Tuesday that the proposal calls for American Tower to proceed with design and permitting in the next 30 days, to pay for make-ready improvements to the utility infrastructure, then to construct a fiber optic network and install the antennae sites after the first cell phone service provider signs on.

"The key to the process is completion of the make-ready phase in a timely fashion," Mr.

Parker said. "The utilities such as Comcast and Verizon and NStar, already using the poles, have to make those poles ready to accept wiring and new equipment on existing and probably some new poles. It's a space sharing puzzle that needs to be solved."

The DAS committee plans a joint public hearing on the matter after the contract is signed, Mr. Parker said. "This is a good deal financially, costs us nothing and provides a needed community service," he added. The American Tower bid also provides free use of the system for public uses, including public safety (police, fire and emergency) departments.

Noting that the committee and American Tower are working out contract language and details, Mr. Parker said that, "if the permitting process is completed within 30 days, it is conceivable the system could be operative by next summer. We need to use all our persuasive powers to get this done."

Chilmark has a DAS cell phone bylaw that provides permitting and oversight by a plan review committee made up of the planning board, the zoning board of appeals and a selectman.

Aquinnah has had a longstanding wireless bylaw that provides for DAS. "We're all set. They can start digging holes and pounding nails today," town coordinator Jeff Burgoyne said yesterday.

West Tisbury does not have a cell phone bylaw that applies to DAS.

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