

Does Your Church Steeple House An Antenna?



Churchgoers seeking a better connection with God might have to look no further than their church's steeple.

It could contain a cellphone antenna.

Looking for places to put the devices — and to pacify people opposed to large, metal towers — wireless carriers across the country turn to churches and other buildings to rent space for antennas. In addition to steeples, antennas can be hidden in cupolas, bell towers, flagpoles, signs, water towers and trees.

"You'd be absolutely amazed where these things are," said Chris Pleibel, president of the Pennsylvania Wireless Association in Allentown.

It's easier to persuade municipal officials to put a cell antenna in a new flagpole in a park than to build a 200-foot tower, Pleibel said.

"It has really exploded in the last five years," said Andrew Messing, president of Larson Camouflage, a Tucson, Ariz., company that specializes in concealing cell towers.

The company recently completed a project in Fox Chapel that involved disguising a tower as a pine tree. In other locales, its workers incorporated antennas into street light poles and even put one in a totem pole in Las Vegas.

The cost can range from \$30,000 to more than \$100,000, depending on size.

Cellphones work through a system of radio waves and towers or antennas to transmit calls. Like other radio transmissions, cellphone calls can be interrupted by severe weather, large buildings or other objects blocking the nearest cell tower.

Hidden antennas are not without controversy. In addition to "visual blight" — not everyone is a fan of fake trees — people living near cellphone antennas have

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complained of headaches, dizziness, nausea and other ailments. Industry officials and a number of health organizations say there is no evidence that living near an antenna is hazardous to human health.

The proliferation of antennas sprang from the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which prevented local jurisdictions from shutting out wireless carriers, and is expected to continue. Wireless subscribers more than doubled over the past decade, fueling demand for antennas, experts said.

Churches can be ideal locations for cell antennas, said Steven Kazella, president of Airwaves Management, a Wilmington, N.C., company that represents landlords.

"They're mostly in residential areas, with high steeples ... and the zoning restrictions aren't as severe," Kazella said.

By leasing space, a church could bring in as much as \$30,000 a year.

Verizon Wireless would not discuss specific sites in the Pittsburgh region but confirmed it has agreements with some churches.

"Location drives our selection, not any category of property owners," spokeswoman Laura Merritt said. "If a church is located in an area where we need to locate a cell site and the church is a willing landlord ... we would consider a lease agreement with the church. But we do not seek out churches for cell site locations."

AT&T has an antenna in a Pittsburgh church steeple — and in a bell tower and one made to look like a tree, spokeswoman Brandy Bell-Truskey said.

With so many people using cellphones at home instead of land lines, demand requires establishing cell sites in residential neighborhoods, T-Mobile spokesman Steven Caplan said.

"T-Mobile prefers to install antennas on existing structures whenever possible ... including churches," Caplan said. "The antennas and supporting structures are painted to match the existing facade."

More churches might line up to ink deals with cellular companies as the cost of building maintenance climbs and congregations shrink, said Michael Hardin, a steeplejack from Litchfield, Ohio, who has worked on steeples containing cellphone antennas.

"For some of the older churches, it could be the wave of the future," Hardin said.

Some churches have embraced the technology.

Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church has had a cellphone antenna in its steeple for about 10 years and uses the rent money to pay for church maintenance, said Wayne Daily, building manager.

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"It was something we never counted on," he said. "As long as there is a certain elevation, they can put them about anywhere."

The United Methodist Church has a formal relationship with SteepleCom, an Ashby, Mass., company that brings churches and telecommunications companies together in leasing agreements. The company's client list includes about 29,000 churches.

"Nobody wants a tower, but everybody wants their iPhone to work," SteepleCom founder Tom Moylan said.

Some churches, concerned about the tax implications, have not rushed into the wireless age.

The Methodist church warns its member churches they could be subject to business income tax. St. Mary of the Mount on Mt. Washington, a Catholic church, was approached about placing a cellphone antenna in its steeple during a renovation about 17 years ago, said the Rev. Lou Vallone, pastor at the time.

"They would pay for the tower, pay for maintenance and pay for security for the first 20 years," he said. "I figured that would be about half-a-million dollars to the church."

Diocesan attorneys nixed the deal.

"We caution (parishes) that there could be adverse real estate consequences in doing this," said Christopher Ponticello, associate general counsel for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh.

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