https://www.thesentinel.com/communities/montgomery-county-needs-affordable-broadband-not-5g-cell-towers-to-bridge-the-digital-divide/article_c4cb0ec6-e1f3-11eb-9735-5bb51f9713d4.html

Montgomery County needs affordable broadband, not 5G cell towers, to bridge the digital divide

by Theodora Scarato MSW
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Montgomery County Council is poised to vote on new zoning (ZTA 19-07) that would allow telecom companies to install their highly profitable wireless 5G network equipment right in our front yards.

Proponents claim that fast-tracking 5G will help bridge the digital divide and lead to digital equity. However, ZTA 19-07 in no way guarantees that low-income communities, or those historically underserved, will gain increased access. What ZTA 19-07*will do* is allow multiple telecom companies to put multiple cell towers and the large 5G equipment boxes as close as 30 feet from our homes. No notice. No hearing. No community input.

NPR's article on the Digital Equity states, “5G won't close the digital divide. In fact, because it will speed the obsolescence of technology low-income people can afford, it will likely make it worse.” The Communication Workers of America has issued several reports on “misleading 5G Hype” and how new network deployment paired with “sweetheart deals” “only exacerbates the digital divide.”



98.8% of Montgomery County already has broadband access. In most of the county, the digital divide is about affordability, not accessibility. One of the main reasons that low-income communities are at a digital disadvantage is that they cannot afford home broadband connections

and thus have few options for getting online other than using their cell phones. Creating more, fancier 5G “smart” services doesn't actually do anything to help, and in fact, might push broadband out of reach for those who need it most.

Instead of ramming through legislation lacking evidence-based policy, Montgomery County should follow the lead of Portland, Oregon, which issued a Digital Inclusion and Digital Equity Report as the strategic roadmap to guide its infrastructure policy. The report found that underserved communities require strategies that go well beyond physical access and connectivity, such as 5G cell towers. Instead, the report underscored that underserved communities encounter key barriers such as the costs of computer purchase, maintenance and service--none of which are addressed by ZTA 19-07.

If the Council really wants to support equity in Montgomery County, councilmembers can address the issue directly by supporting affordable fiber broadband connections; affordable computers with free tech support and education; and funding a full analysis of the digital inequity in the county so that policy recommendations can be science-based and data-driven.

In fact, Montgomery County already has a Digital Equity program pinpointing these very issues providing low cost home internet for some low income families as well as a pilot program in *just one* Rockville apartment community. Yet the Council seems laser focused on handouts to wireless companies, rather than addressing the real needs of our community.

Littering neighborhoods with cell towers is an environmental justice issue. There’s no excuse for towers so close to homes. By shrinking the cell tower setbacks from 300 to 30 feet, ZTA 19-07 would only magnify the negative consequences. The closer the tower is to your home, the greater the possible health risks and the ugly intrusive visual impact. Property values are likely to go down for any residents who suddenly find that a telecom tower has invaded their front lawn, but the economic hit is likely to be especially hard on those with smaller properties, whose homes are close to the street. On the flip side, people in wealthier areas with more spacious yards will not be so close to the taller, thicker poles laced with bulky equipment boxes.

Scientific data points to serious health risks to our children and families. According to the University of California, Berkeley, hundreds of independent scientists who study the impact of cellular radiation are calling to halt the 5G small-cell rollout because of the published research showing harm. Meanwhile, Councilmember Hans Riemer, now running for County Executive,

repeatedly dismisses residents raising cell tower radiation health risks as “kooky people” peddling “fear mongering conspiracy theories”and “junk science.” Yet, US scientists, now retired from the government, are calling for caution, referring to the scientific evidence as “strong”.

I myself used to assume that the US government was ensuring cell tower radiation was safe. Yet the reality is that the EPA was defunded from researching the safety of wireless radiation decades ago, just as it was poised to set safety limits.

No health or environmental agency has a funded mandate to ensure safety from cell phone tower radiation, nor have they conducted a scientific evaluation of the adequacy of FCC’s 1996 human exposure limits, despite the fact that NIH’s own research found cancer and DNA damage. Research reviews repeatedly find that these seemingly “low level” exposures can cause oxidative stress, which is well understood to play a role in the development of many chronic diseases, including cancer. ZTA 19-07 does not allow for any medical accommodations. Health care inequalities will further exacerbate the inequity.

Vulnerable households are already disproportionately at risk because of the lax oversight and enforcement for cell antennas and cell towers in the county. The Montgomery County Tower Committee has greenlighted applications for 20 rooftop wireless facilities where projected cell tower radiation exposures exceed FCC limits, yet no county agency has any process to measure the exposures to residents inside the apartment buildings, nor any framework to ensure compliance with federal safety measures.

“Small” cell towers have already been placed directly in front of apartment buildings in residential zones. Despite the fact that they are closer than the current 60 foot zoning rule, no-one, not the Department of Permitting Services nor the tower committee raised any objection. As far as we know, the required mandatory conditional use hearings were never held.

While cell towers are prohibited from being built on school property in Los Angeles and while San Diego County ensures a 300 food setback for small cells near schools, in Montgomery County’s own data reveals that cell antennas are placed disproportionately at schools where at least one-third of students are eligible for free and reduced price meals.

When a 5G streamlining bill was introduced in California, the State Department of Finance issued an analysis, which not only recommended against the bill, but it also concluded that it failed to cure the basic wireless digital divide issues because the bill gave companies the power to determine

where they build small-cell towers. Likewise, the Montgomery County 5G ZTA 19-07 provides no assurances for underserved communities, but instead rolls out the red carpet for companies to do what they want, where they want, cutting the people out of the decision-making process.

Many people in Montgomery County are unaware that in 2018 their Council passed ZTA 18-02, which allows placement of small-cell towers within 10 feet from homes in mixed commercial/residential areas. A local PR firm's blog post boasts that they were retained by a wireless company and "worked with the Executive Branch to craft legislation" to "bring 5G to Montgomery County." The firm even "created a coalition of community organizations to speak in support of small cells." Astroturfing is when industry creates and finances 'grassroots' movements campaigning on behalf of industry.

In the three years since ZTA 18-02 was passed, we have seen no data indicating it helped connect low income families who live in these zones. A Center for Public Integrity investigation highlighted Montgomery County in "FCC says small cells will close the digital divide. Most say they won't." CNET headlines read "5G hype won't close the digital divide." Yet Council Members continue the rhetoric that ZTA 19-07 will somehow bridge the digital divide despite the fact that all it really does is pave the way for more than 33,000 street lights and utility poles in Montgomery County neighborhoods to be newly eligible as "small" cell tower sites.

ZTA 19-07 is a give-away to the billion-dollar telecom industry. It will only further exacerbate existing inequity. Telecom has a duty to their shareholders, not to the underserved. Rest assured, when the cell towers have all been built in our front yards, the families that are unconnected today, will still be unconnected. Montgomery County can, and must, do better.

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The Montgomery County Coalition has a petition asking the Montgomery Council to create a stakeholder group and Theodora Scarato will be presenting a webinar on July 14, 2021 for the Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition. Register here.

Retraction Note: Earlier a quote was inaccurately attributed to Angela Siefer, the executive director of National Digital Inclusion Alliance but the quote was from the NPR report itself.