

St. Croix CZM Delays Decision on Contested East End Communications Tower After New Questions and Calls for Alternatives

After renewed concerns over runoff, noise, property values, radio frequency exposure, and visual impact, the St. Croix Coastal Zone Management Committee delayed a decision on the proposed 150-foot East End communications tower for up to 20 days.

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A decision on a proposed 150-foot communications tower for the east end of St. Croix has been put on hold after another lengthy and heated public discussion, with the St. Croix Coastal Zone Management Committee choosing Thursday night to delay action and seek additional answers from the developer while also asking opponents to bring forward workable alternatives.

The tower, proposed by Blue Sky Towers III, would be built on a privately owned parcel in Estate Long Point and Cotton Garden. The project has already drawn strong opposition from nearby residents, who during a February public hearing raised concerns about stormwater runoff, possible noise, and the impact the structure could have on quality of life. At that time, commissioners asked that alternative locations be explored and that other issues be addressed.

Although Thursday's meeting was scheduled as the decision-making portion of the process, meaning public questions and comments were not expected to be taken, committee chair Kai Nielsen acknowledged that the matter was still evolving and allowed additional public input.

"There's a massive portion of this role that does not only consider the environmental impact but also the social and economic impact as well," he said.

Kevin Rames, an attorney representing Blue Sky in the application process, began by addressing prior concerns about the access road proposed for the site. He said those concerns led to substantial changes in the project. "The project has been reconstituted, revamped, changed in significant ways to allow for the construction of a significantly shorter road," Mr. Rames said.

He said the revised layout was intended to ensure "that the environmental impact of the creation of this site is minimized as much as possible."

According to Mr. Rames, the road envelope is now expected to measure 120 feet by 30 feet, rather than the originally proposed 60-foot square area. He said the revised road area is "small enough so that it does not qualify for the creation of a storm water pollution prevention program."

Mr. Rames also said the current site was selected only after 11 possible locations were considered. He told the committee that Plot 3 Estate Long Point and Cotton Garden was the only one not burdened by conservation easements or restrictions that would prevent construction of the tower.

He further explained that government-owned property could not be used because the project depends in part on commercial activity. While the tower would be used to [expand the territory's FirstNet public responder network](#), he said two private bays would also be installed and leased to other telecommunications companies.

"That is the only way that the First Net system is funded in the U.S. Virgin Islands," Mr. Rames said.

He concluded by saying he believed the revised project "does not have the negative environmental impacts that were identified by the South Grape Tree Bay residents."

But those assurances did not resolve the broader concerns raised by opponents.

Area resident Mark Salisbury told the committee that Mr. Rames had addressed only the road issue, not other objections involving "property devaluation, high power radio frequency being pumped into people's homes, view degradation and environmental concerns."

Mr. Salisbury also said the presentation failed to address alternatives to the tower itself. He suggested that other options, including "something like micro cells, which bolt to existing power poles throughout the area," should be considered instead.

According to Mr. Salisbury, micro cells would likely provide better coverage because "all of the dead zones that are currently masked by terrain...could be filled in with micro cells."

He also argued that attaching smaller units to existing infrastructure would avoid the environmental impacts tied to the proposed tower project. “there would be no environmental impact at all, because you would not have to cut one single road, pour one single ounce of concrete, build any towers,” he said.

The question of access through private roads also arose during the discussion. Mr. Rames responded by citing Virgin Islands law.

“There is a long standing law in the U.S. Virgin Islands that says that if you have a subdivision road, and that subdivision road services more than 10 residences, that that road is open to the public,” he said.

He contrasted that with laws in other states “where subdivisions can close itself off from the general public and from commercial use.”

Mr. Rames also sought to reassure residents about traffic tied to the site once construction is finished. He said the level of activity would be very limited after that phase is complete. “You’re really talking about...a truck coming in to check it out, maybe once a month, nothing of any real significance,” he said.

Still, with new questions continuing to emerge from both commissioners and members of the public, Mr. Nielsen proposed that the matter be tabled so those issues could be formally compiled and sent to Blue Sky Towers for response.

After commissioners met in executive session, Mr. Nielsen returned and asked residents opposed to the project to help identify realistic alternatives the committee could present to the developer.

He urged the opposition to “bring a solution that we can pose to the developers” so the committee could advocate on the public’s behalf. “It’s easy to say we don’t want something...but here we’re forced to look at solutions,” he said. “It can’t just be a hard ‘No’, because that’s not the world we live in.”

The decision will now be delayed for a maximum of 20 days. During that time, the committee will seek answers to the questions raised and explore possible alternatives. Mr. Nielsen thanked Mr. Rames for agreeing to the postponement and said another announcement will be made when the committee is ready to issue a final decision on the proposed communications tower.