

South Algonquin issues letter of support for cell tower

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

After abstaining for a vote on a cell tower at 3121A Hwy 523 in Madawaska at their last meeting on March 6, South Algonquin Township council heard another presentation from Rogers' agent Spectra Point Inc. representatives Saja Elshaikh and Chris Leggett at their meeting on April 3. Despite opposition to the tower's location, council was compelled to issue a letter of concurrence as cell tower siting is federally regulated, but they did so conditionally with their objections to the location of the tower included within the body of the letter. CAO/clerk-treasurer Bryan Martin comments on this second presentation from Spectra Point Inc. and council's decision to send a letter of concurrence. Leggett and Elshaikh from Spectra Point Inc., an agent of Rogers, presented to South Algonquin council for the second time at their April 3 meeting regarding the cell tower to be built on Hwy 523 in Madawaska. Leggett explained that after their last presentation they were asked to return with additional information and to answer various council questions regarding the deployment of the tower on Hwy 523. He said there were four questions in particular; to clarify council's role with respect to voting for concurrence, why the tower can't be moved south out of the township, why EORN is only covering a portion and not the entire township and how South Algonquin will benefit from the tower. He said he wanted to address these queries. For the first question, Leggett said that federal guidelines require them to consult with the Land Use Authority, which in this case is South Algonquin Township, and to follow any township protocols if applicable, which they did. If no protocols exist, they follow CPC guidelines set out by ISED. They are also required to consult with staff, which they did, and as a result moved the tower from its original proposed location to another location about a quarter kilometre northeast. In terms of council's role, essentially council's role is to confirm and require that the applicant followed the federal guidelines and the township's protocols if applicable. And so the vote is essentially confirming whether we have followed that process, he says. For the second question, Leggett explained that moving the tower out of South Algonquin would compromise coverage and leave a large area without coverage or with very bad coverage. If we were to move this site to the south of your border, between your two townships, it would end up too close to the other tower and it would leave an area that's poorly covered to the south of the northern most tower. So while it does lie relatively close to the border, it's required to cover the area at that portion of your township, he says. For the third question, Leggett explained that South Algonquin is not part of the eastern Ontario region, but part of Nipissing region. Despite this, EORN elected to provide some coverage and allocate some funding to deploy this tower and two others in South Algonquin. The purpose of those three sites was to improve coverage, particularly the two on Hwy 523. So, it isn't part of EORN's mandate to blanket your entire township with coverage. The funds aren't there to do that, but nevertheless they allocated funds to do so, particularly on your major roadways, he says. For the fourth question, Leggett revealed that South Algonquin will benefit from the tower by having significantly improved in-car coverage, improved in-building coverage in areas relatively close to the tower, upgraded 911 calling service, and increased access to another option for high-speed Internet provided by this site. And so, all of these enhanced services will of course also support future economic development in the area. So, we believe that there will be a significant benefit to the community due to the sites being deployed as part of the program, he says. Councillor Joan Kuiack and Councillor Shawn Pigeon thanked Leggett and Elshaikh for the clarification and for showing the coverage benefits with the maps. Councillor Joe Florent was still opposed to the tower, thought a better site could be found if they'd tried harder and didn't know of anyone in the area around the proposed tower who supported it. He subsequently excused himself from the room for any other discussion or the vote on the letter of concurrence, as he was so opposed to it, and didn't want to influence any other council members with his stance. After more discussion and queries from council to Leggett and Elshaikh on the tower, council decided to go ahead with a letter of concurrence, acknowledging that they'd followed federal guidelines, but with the condition that there be some wording added to the letter stating that they were opposed to the site chosen for the tower. Martin told Bancroft This Week that the letter was sent to Rogers and a copy of it will be in council's package for the May 1 meeting as information. We have no further information on the timeline for the towers at this time.