

Officials say Germantown needs better cell service, but not everyone likes the current plan

[Corinne S Kennedy](#), Memphis Commercial Appeal

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A new cellphone tower has been proposed to alleviate cell service issues in Germantown. The tower will be on the Dogwood Elementary campus, if approved. (Photo: Corinne Kennedy/The Commercial Appeal)

Residents of Germantown often lament the spotty cellphone service in the city, complaining of dropped calls and static-filled connections, while public safety officials caution that poor coverage can lead to dropped calls to 911 — the vast majority of which are now made on cellphones. However, a plan to construct a new cell tower near a school has drawn the ire of some parents and residents, who fear the tower's proximity to the school could create health hazards for students.

The plan to put a 140-foot monopole cellphone tower on the Dogwood Elementary School campus, originally brought forward by the school district, was approved by the Germantown planning commission and board of zoning appeals. It will appear before the city's design review board Tuesday. The board of mayor and aldermen will give a final yes or no in the coming weeks, but a meeting date has not yet been set.

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Concerns raised over radio frequencies, health issues

A group of residents, including some with kids or grandkids at Dogwood, have raised concerns about having the tower on school grounds and some have said they're worried the radio frequency waves could lead to an increased risk of cancer. A [petition urging city officials to find a new location](#) for the tower on the website change.org gathered more than 350 signatures in about two days.

Members of some city commissions have said using a cellphone around a child is more dangerous than allowing them to go to school near a tower and have stressed that lack of cellphone service is itself a public safety issue.

Others have sympathized with the concerns of the parents but said their hands are tied by federal law. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 prevents state and local governments from regulating "the placement, construction, and modification of personal wireless service facilities on the basis of the environmental effects of radio frequency emissions."

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At a meeting of the city's technology commission Tuesday, commissioner Gregory Blumenthal said radio frequency waves decrease in strength significantly as they travel outward from the tower.

"A smartphone here, to me, is a heck of a lot more powerful than one of those antennas or all of those antennas if I was standing at the base of that tower," he said, holding his cellphone next to his head.

Commissioner Jared Klepko, who said he had two children at Dogwood and two more who would be attending within the next five years, said a cellphone tower isn't Three Mile Island, but it wasn't proven to be harmless, either.

He pointed out that foreign countries and jurisdictions within the U.S. were rewriting regulations to keep cell towers farther away from places like schools and asked why take the risk if there was a chance it posed a danger to kids.

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Blumenthal dismissed the questions and said there was more risk from Wi-Fi and cellphones themselves — now both ubiquitous in schools — than from cellphone towers.

"If you are concerned about the exposure — and it's the same radio frequency waves — if you are concerned, throw out your cellphone," he said.

Klepko said that just because teachers and school administrators might have or use cellphones near kids didn't make the cell tower location a good idea.

"If the cellphone is bad, why would we compound it?" he asked.

Families and residents weigh in

Germantown resident Robbie Davis started researching cell tower technology after a bid to put one at a church in her neighborhood several years ago. When she heard a cell tower might be built at Dogwood — her grandson's school — she started doing more research to see if new studies indicating cell towers were safe had been published but didn't find any. Now, she's working with the group behind the petition urging officials to find a new location.

"We are asking that they move the cell tower to another location," she said. "We're not saying they don't need another cell tower."

Davis said she got most of her information about cellphone towers from the [Environmental Health Trust](#) and [Physicians for Safe Technology](#) websites. The research she found also raised many questions about the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates telecommunications and sets safety standards for things like radio frequency waves.

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"As a member of the public, I don't feel confident that they're acting in my best interest," she said.

Travis Flee has two kids at Dogwood. He found out about the cell tower when the school board posted on Facebook in January about the proposal. He said he had no idea before then that it was in the works, and that he wanted city officials to come up with an alternative location.

"Placing it next to the developing children's brains when there is science out there that says extreme caution should be utilized sounds irresponsible," he said in a text message.

What research says about cellphone towers, cancer and health

Few studies have focused specifically on cellphone towers and cancer, leaving room for interpretation even among those who have done significant research.

Studies focused on the types of radio frequency waves produced by cellphones and cell towers have been done on animals. In some of the studies where animals developed cancer, the animals were constantly exposed to cell tower radiation. Outside the lab, cell towers emit radio frequency waves when pinged by a cellphone, rather than a constant stream.



A new cellphone tower has been proposed to alleviate cell service issues in Germantown. The tower will be on the Dogwood Elementary campus, on the other side of the trees separating the school campus from Dogwood Park, if approved. (Photo: Corinne Kennedy/The Commercial Appeal)

A study [published in November by the National Institutes of Health](#) showed an increased risk of cancerous tumors in rats exposed to high levels of the type of radio frequency waves used in 2G and 3G cellphone technology. That study applied higher levels of radio frequency waves than what humans experience when using a cellphone to the rats. The rats also had their entire bodies exposed to the waves.

The study did not look at the types of radio frequency waves associated with 5G and Wi-Fi technology. The tower proposed for Dogwood is a 3G/4G/5G tower.

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Scientists involved in the study warned that the outcomes seen in rats cannot be directly applied to humans and that 5G technology is very different from 2G and 3G technology.

The American Cancer Society has said there is [little evidence that living, working or attending school near a cellphone tower](#) leads to an increased risk of cancer. While people who support the tower at Dogwood have pointed to this statement, Davis and others who do not support the tower say the American Cancer Society focuses on treatment of cancer, not researching its causes.

Planning where the tower may go

Michael Fahy of Prime Development Group — who has been representing the cell tower project before city commissions — said the tower will service T-Mobile and Verizon but could accommodate four carriers total.

He said the placement of the tower was determined by carrier service requirements and topography and that no better site had been identified to provide cell service to the city's dead zone — a triangle of poor cell reception between Poplar Avenue, Wolf River and Farmington boulevards and Johnson Road. He said the proposed location had already been adjusted slightly to move it away from Dogwood Park.

"This site is as close as we can get to the perfect site," Fahy said. "Yes, the due diligence has been done and this is the best site."

City officials said there are already several cell towers in close proximity to Germantown schools. Most recently, a cell tower similar to the one being proposed near Dogwood, was approved to be built on the campus of the Madonna Learning Center.

Corinne Kennedy is a reporter for The Commercial Appeal. She can be reached at Corinne.Kennedy@commercial.appeal.com or on Twitter [@CorinneSKennedy](#)