

Bitter battle over cellphone mast on church site
West Rand community appeals to public protector

A West Rand community has appealed to the public protector to investigate the proposed erection of a cellphone mast on the premises of a church in the area.

In a last-ditch attempt to prevent the construction that is scheduled for this week, the community of Rangeview in Krugersdorp has accused cellphone giant MTN of not giving appropriate consideration before its decision to go ahead with the project.

Resident Sarah Piketh said the initial notification was sent in October 2008. MTN said at the time it wanted to construct a cellphone tower in the church grounds of the Anglican Church of the Ascension in Rangeview, Krugersdorp.

But after doing research and having discussions, the community objected strongly to the proposal, citing reasons of health, aesthetics, potential impact on property values and the fact that there would be increased lightning activity due to the height of such a mast which would endanger the complex across the road which has thatched roofs.

Piketh said the church had been willing to lease its grounds to MTN from the start.

In October 2009 residents wrote a letter to the Anglican Archbishop Reverend Thabo Makgoba pleading that it reconsider its decision to lease the land to MTN.

"We made it very clear that we did not want this project to go ahead, but the church decided

to continue with no regard for the community."

Piketh further wrote that she had a four-year-old boy with special needs and was concerned about the effects on his already ailing life. She said there had been an article in the Star about a family living next to a mast in Joburg and the effects it had had on their health.

"Many people complain that they can hear a constant buzzing from such a mast and, as our child does not yet speak, he would be unable to communicate any ill effects. Overseas, many churches are refusing to have such masts on their grounds as much of the bandwidth is used for pornography, particularly 3G masts. We are fighting for our democratic right yet the message from the church is that financial gain is more important.

"We are dismayed by the fact that our concerns have been ignored and the potential impact on our health has been pushed aside. Is the church going to pay for medical expenses should one or more of the neighbour's be affected? How far will their R3 000 a month stretch then?"

In the letter to the public protector, Piketh wrote that the community had objected and had even officially appealed against the project but so far their concerns have fallen on deaf ears.

"We have lodged an appeal previously and have not had satisfactory response. We would like to request that you visit the site yourself (as we are of the view that the site inspector Avhatakali Mahada was unaware of all the factors - the basic assessment report was not accurate) to see that there will, in fact, be considerable visual intrusion."

But yesterday, Robert Madzonga, chief corporate affairs officer for MTN, said the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had issued a valid and defensible environmental authorisation to build a base transceiver station which was issued after a public consultation process was done, as required in terms of the applicable legislation.

Madzonga said MTN also obtained an independent expert, whose expertise lies in electromagnetic fields, to present to the community in November last year.

"This is not a formal requirement in terms of due process, but was done in order to provide facts to the members of the community. This particular base station has also been assessed in terms of the guidelines issued by the International Commission for non-Ionising Radiation Protection, which guidelines are endorsed by the Department of Health, and the report has predicted this mast will be well within the relevant safety margin."

He said MTN had not received any notification from the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that an appeal had been lodged within the specified and prescribed time frame and that in terms of the law an environmental authorisation was not required at this particular site, therefore there was nothing to appeal against.

Madzonga refused to confirm payments to the church, saying MTN had entered into a lease agreement with the "registered owner of the premises, and such lease agreement is private and contains a confidentiality clause".

The parish priest Reverend Greg Longbottom refused to comment.

But Piketh is unimpressed.

"The public participation process was fatally flawed. They did not give all the neighbours a notification as is required by legislation.

"MTN brought in a 'professional expert' after two years of us fighting and nagging over the issue. The expert is a consultant paid by MTN and so cannot be considered objective.

"We have proof that we lodged an appeal - signed by the staff at the department," she said.