

Public outcry kills cell tower plan

Proposal for pristine Bernardo Mountain rejected by San Dieguito River Park

By [David Garrick \(/staff/david-garrick/\)](/staff/david-garrick/) 4:38 p.m. Nov. 27, 2013



Bernardo Mountain is shown in the distance as two runners are shown in the foreground. — *Charlie Neuman / San Diego Union-Tribune*

ESCONDIDO — Outcry from nearby residents has prompted leaders of the San Dieguito River Park to reject a large cell tower proposed within the park on Bernardo Mountain.

The tower, which was proposed by AT&T, would have improved cellphone reception near Lake Hodges in southwestern Escondido.

It also would have provided the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority that manages the park with as much as \$60,000 per year to maintain the hiking trails, creeks and valleys of the 55-mile linear park, which stretches from Del Mar to Julian.

But the proposed tower was harshly criticized as an unacceptable eyesore by a tight-knit group of Escondido residents living just outside the park along the northern face of the 1,150-foot mountain.

“That area is supposed to be for the deer and the hawks and the other animals,” said resident Tisha Bennett, adding that wildlife has steadily rebounded in the area since it was scorched by the 2007 fires.

Bennett said Tuesday that allowing one tower might eventually lead to several more on the pristine mountain.

“We can’t have this place start looking like Mt. Woodson,” she said, referring to a mountain in Poway featuring several antennas near its peak.

Clay Tyler, who launched an online petition against the proposed tower early this month, said Tuesday that the residents are different from typical homeowners complaining that something could ruin their views.

In 2002, they jointly contributed nearly \$800,000 so that the San Dieguito River Park Conservancy, which works with the joint powers authority to acquire land for the park, could buy the entire mountain and prevent a developer from building 80 homes there.

Tyler said the residents were promised their contributions would guarantee no development of any kind.

“If it didn’t violate the letter of our gift, it violated the spirit of our gift,” he said. “It would be completely inappropriate to have a large cell tower there.”

Dick Bobertz, executive director of the river park, sent an email to the city last week saying the project wouldn’t move forward.

“Due to negative neighborhood response I have advised AT&T I couldn’t support their proposal and they have decided not to proceed,” his email said.

Susan Carter, the park's deputy director, said Tuesday that the lease revenue could have helped spruce up some trails on the mountain and nearby areas. But she said the resident backlash was too strong.

"I think we heard very clearly what people had to say about it," she said.

While residents said they're relieved, they also vowed to be ready if any similar proposals come forward. Bennett and Tyler said they're prepared to go door-to-door, send letters and protest at meetings if it becomes necessary.

The cell tower would have faced additional hurdles if the river park's board had approved it. Escondido city staff and the Escondido Planning Commission would have had to approve a conditional use permit.

City Councilman Mike Morasco said he doubted the tower could get city support.

"I would fight this vehemently should it ever come up again," Morasco said.

Mayor Sam Abed agreed.

"Bernardo Mountain is a beautiful part of nature that needs to be preserved," he said.

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