

M-NCPPC



MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARK AND PLANNING

THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL
PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

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June 3, 2005

MEMORANDUM – MANDATORY REFERRAL

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: John A. Carter, Chief *JAC*
Community-Based Planning Division

FROM: Marilyn Clemens, Planner Coordinator (301/495-4572) *MC*
Bethesda-Chevy Chase Team
Community-Based Planning Division

SUBJECT: Mandatory Referral No. 05205-DTS-1: Thomas W. Pyle Middle School –
Nextel Communications Monopole, 6301 Wilson Lane, Bethesda, R-60
Zone, Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan

RECOMMENDATION: DISAPPROVAL

Transmit the following comments to the Board of Education:

The Board of Education/Nextel application should not be approved as submitted for the following reasons:

1. The pole location does not meet the setback requirements.
2. The pole does not accommodate three carriers as required in the Zoning Ordinance.
3. The tower coordinator noted that the same coverage could be achieved with a 100-foot pole instead of the proposed 110-foot pole.
4. A larger location is available nearby at the Landon School. An adequate explanation should be offered as to why the monopole could not be located there, where ample setback from adjacent residences for a pole location could be provided. If the Landon School does not want the monopole located on its campus, another location should be sought.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Montgomery County Public Schools proposes to replace one existing tennis court light pole at the Thomas Pyle Middle School with a monopole provided by Nextel Communications. An equipment shelter will be located near the base of the tower. The Tower Committee approved the Nextel Communications application on December 15, 2004 (attachment #2). On December 27, 2004, the Superintendent of Schools submitted the application for review under the mandatory referral process (attachment #3).

Nextel staff and staff of the M-NCPPC agreed to schedule a balloon test in March and a community meeting in April 2005. The application was considered complete on April 26, 2005, the date of the first community meeting. Because of the concerns and questions raised by parents and nearby residents at the April 26 meeting, a second community meeting was scheduled for May 25, and review by the Planning Board was postponed to June 9.

THE SITE

Thomas Pyle Middle School is located west of the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Wilson Lane, at 6301 Wilson Lane. The approximately 14-acre school site is surrounded by single-family homes. The site is irregular in shape presenting constraints with regard to setbacks from residences. The large Landon School site is located to the east, just beyond Whittier Boulevard. The attached vicinity map shows the campus and its neighborhood (attachment #1).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Nextel Communications proposes the replacement of an existing 30-foot tennis court light pole with a 110-foot monopole on the Thomas Pyle Middle School property. The location proposed for the monopole is next to the tennis courts and just west of the school building (attachments #1 and #4).

The Thomas Pyle Middle School site was selected because it was considered the largest available parcel in the area. Other locations were considered, such as at Whitmar High School. Nextel staff stated they also contacted the Landon School, but the site did not meet Nextel's needs. The stated coverage objective for Nextel is along Wilson Lane and areas around the intersections of Wilson Lane at River Road and Bradley Boulevard for "In Car Penetration (ICP)" along State Highway routes 188, 190 and 191. The Tower Coordinator agreed that the Whitman site did not meet Nextel's coverage needs, but provided no comment on the Landon site. The Tower Coordinator's recommendations are included in attachment #2.

Nextel would place three vertical antennas on the top of the 110-foot pole enclosed within a stealth structure. Neither the antennas nor cables would be visible, although the pole itself would rise above the trees and be visible from the surrounding homes. The Tower Coordinator noted that the same coverage could be achieved with a 100-foot pole.

A fenced equipment enclosure of approximately 31 feet by 22 feet will be placed around the base of the pole. The area selected does not appear to be large enough to accommodate any other carrier equipment.

ANALYSIS

Master Plan

Public Schools as Flexible Resources

The 1990 Master Plan for Bethesda-Chevy Chase emphasizes the use of public schools as flexible resources to meet a variety of community needs. While transmission service to cellular phones may not have been one of the intended needs, the Thomas Pyle Middle School staff does monitor the children through Nextel's service. Providing in-car cell phone reception to drivers on River Road is a public service that was not contemplated by the Master Plan.

New Uses of Public Schools Must be Compatible with the Neighborhood

The Master Plan emphasizes the importance of compatibility with the neighborhood when new uses are programmed for school sites. The cell tower will be visible to most of the neighboring residences throughout the year. A reduction in height in accordance with comments from the Tower Coordinator would reduce the impact on the adjacent residences. The pole should be set back at least 300 feet from all adjacent residences to provide compatibility. In addition, the community has raised the unknown health impacts of the emissions from the cell tower. The review of health impacts is not part of the review process for this mandatory referral.

Development Standards for the Zone

The Thomas Pyle Middle School is located in the R-60 single-family zone. Section 59-G-2a requires the location selected for a monopole to be 300 feet from any surrounding homes. Section 59-G-2.43 requires that monopoles accommodate three carriers and ground space be provided for equipment shelters for future co-locators, unless an exception is granted by the Board of Appeals.

The Nextel proposal does not comply with these standards.

Environment

Forest Conservation – This project is exempt from Forest Conservation (attachment #5).

Stormwater Management – This project can be accommodated by the existing stormwater management systems.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Nextel hosted a community meeting at the Thomas Pyle Middle School on April 26, 2005. Staff of the M-NCPPC provided the list of civic associations. None of those in attendance were notified by their associations but learned of the meeting through the PTA. The parents asked many questions of Nextel staff and their consulting Engineer, Jules Cohen, about the health impacts of tower transmission. Because no neighboring residents were in attendance and the parents present raised strong objections to the placement of the tower, at M-NCPPC staff request, Nextel agreed to host another community meeting. At the second meeting on May 25, residents to the south of the school questioned the proximity of the pole location to their properties and noted that no picture was taken of the pole mockup from their vantage point. At both meetings, questions were asked regarding the selection of Thomas Pyle Middle School rather than the large Landon School campus nearby. The Pyle PTSA voted to disapprove the placement of the pole at the school. The comments of those present on May 25 are similar to the statement submitted by the Pyle Middle School PTSA (attachment #6).

CONCLUSION

The Department does not recommend approval of this mandatory referral for the reasons stated above.

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Attachments:

1. Vicinity Map
2. February 22, 2005 letter from TTFCG Chairperson Lawton
3. December 27, 2004 letter from Dr. Weast to Chairman Berlage
4. Nextel application
5. Forest Conservation Recommendations
6. Statement from the Pyle Middle School PTSA