

That's no tree -- it's a tower in disguise

And they help to make cell phone calls reliable

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Posted Wednesday, December 20, 2006

Look closely next time you pass an object towering along the roadside. What looks like a silo, tree or flag pole might be a cell phone tower, designed so you'll never notice it's there.

As service providers fill in missing coverage spots, cell phone towers are sprouting up all over Delaware and the nation. And, while no one can argue with fewer dropped calls, some object to erecting shiny towers and poles in their backyards and parks.

That's where a little camouflage comes in.

An entire industry has emerged with the sole purpose of making cell phone towers blend into the natural landscape. Take a closer look at that clock tower or that brick chimney, or even that big boulder: It may actually be the piece of equipment that transmits your call.

This week Verizon put the finishing touches on a new "tree" at the Wilmington Manor Fire Company, off South Du Pont Highway.

But disguising the towers sometimes isn't enough to appease residents. This week, the Sussex County's Board of Adjustments rejected Cingular Wireless' plans for a 170-foot tower disguised as a pine tree in rural Sussex.

The tower was proposed for a site within a half-mile of the Woodland Ferry, which is west of Laurel and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. With a treeline residents estimate between 50 and 100 feet, many worried that it would look ridiculous. The State Historic Preservation Office issued a report saying that it would have had no adverse affect on the area, but residents and the board disagreed.

Elsewhere, the towers have blended in just fine.

At Villanova University's old Jake Nevin Field House, Verizon antennas are mounted on the side and painted to blend in with the brick facade. According to a spokeswoman, T-Mobile has more than half a dozen disguised sites in Delaware, including a silo in New Castle County and a 65-foot flag pole along the Philadelphia Pike.

According to Personal Communications Industry Association, the Wireless Infrastructure Association, there are more than 200,000 tower and antennae sites in the nation. Numbers aren't kept on how many of those are camouflaged.

Jonathan Kramer, an engineer who consults with local jurisdictions about cell towers, said he's seen everything from incredibly lifelike trees, with robust fiberglass trunks and full foliage, to what he calls "Frankenpines" with square trunks and fully visible antenna panels.

At Tucson-based Larson Camouflage, a company with roots in theme-park and zoo environments, no disguise is too bold.

"If you dream it, we can build it," said company president Andrew Messing.

Branches -- similar to those found on an artificial Christmas tree -- climb up the metal pole of the tower. In Arizona, the company disguises towers as Saguaro cactuses. In more tropical climates providers can choose between Mexican fan palm and date palm trees. On a Pebble Beach golf course the company has turned towers into dead trees called "snags" that are common to Southern California.

On the other side of the country, in Charleston, S.C., a company called Stealth Concealment Solutions has been hiding cell

phone technology for more than 15 years. In an undisclosed South Carolina location one of their towers is designed as a nesting area for osprey. A company specialty is mounting towers disguised as chimneys onto old buildings. A Stealth Tower is made of plastics that are designed to mimic the exact year and style of the brickwork on the building.

"It's becoming more common every year," CEO Sean McLernon said of tower disguising.

McLernon said his company has erected towers as flag poles and received warm remarks from community members who didn't realize that the symbol of patriotism was also a symbol of the growing dominance of cell phones.

"This is a great way to incorporate two things that really work," McLernon said, adding that pretty much every outdoor object is fair game for his team.

"Rocks are always fun," he said.

Kramer, who keeps a gallery of unique cell phone towers on a personal Web site, said one of his personal favorites is a bison cutout that sits atop a tall hill passed by motorists driving from Cheyenne, Wyo., to Denver.

The disguised cell phone towers are possible because the fiberglass panels in which they are stored can be manipulated into all sorts of shapes.

"The things people normally see are the covers for the antennas," he said.

For instance, a mock sequoia tree's bark is made from a mould of real bark.

A standard tower can cost \$150,000 to \$200,000, he said. A full disguise could add as much as \$100,000 to that.

As cell tower pines, palms and cacti sprout up nearly as fast as consumers snatch up cell phones, Blackberry devices and other bandwidth-eating gadgets, Kramer said the cell phone tower proliferation is far from over.

"I think we're about 40 [percent] to 50 percent through it right now."

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