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Local News

Communications Tower is up, but not yet operational

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After months of site changes and building, the 400-foot steel 800 mhz Next Generation emergency communications tower now stands on Industrial Drive on the west side of Middletown.

While the tower may be up, Michele Ackles, spokeswoman for the Department of Technology and Information, said it is not quite operational.

“As far as the actual construction goes, it’s pretty well complete,” Ackles said.

Ackles said last week DTI poured concrete in for a pad for the shelter near the tower. This week, DTI is pouring in the pad for the electrical generator and putting up ladders, as well as some wiring. Overall, construction costs about \$975,000.

This tower will be used so first responders to emergencies and disasters can communicate via radios more reliably. Overall, responders would have stable communication 98.5 percent of the time indoors and 99.5 percent of the time outdoors with the new tower, Ackles said.

“[The responders] will all be able to speak to each other by radio indoors or outdoors, no matter where they are,” Ackles said.

The tower is a part of a network of 17 towers, some already built, across New Castle County. Other towers to include one near Lums Pond and at the Delaware Emergency Management Agency near Smyrna. Ackles said the network should be fully operational by May, although this is not necessary for the tower to work, and the tower itself may be in operation sooner than the full network.

Overall, building the network will cost the state in excess of \$15 million and, while there are some sub vendors, Motorola is the main vendor for the project, Ackles said.

Odessa Fire Chief Ken Getty said good things about the new tower.

“The tower is needed very badly in this area,” Getty said.

He also said there have been incidents where the lack of coverage impeded the work.

“Basement fires are the worst and communications have been lost in the past. We are talking about a wood frame house with the radios going below one grade. They either stop working or become so unable to understand what the person is saying because of ‘digital interference’,” he said.

The tower’s construction caused a lot of controversy in early 2006, when the 800 mhz Next Generation Committee was deciding whether to put the tower in a commercial or residential area. At first, the committee unanimously chose to build the tower on state land near the Department of Transportation maintenance yard on Summit Bridge Road. However, they changed to build on a privately-owned area on Industrial Drive after residents in Lakeside and Sharondale voiced concerns about the tower’s proximity to the residential area.

Kristen Krenzer, public relations officer and webmaster for the Town of Middletown, said Southgate Concrete owns the land and the Town of Middletown pays a \$3,000 per month lease which is deducted from Southgate’s utility bill.

She also said the tower has the capability to host cell phone access, but there isn’t any at this time. If they do lease cell phone access, the state will handle the negotiations and pay Middletown \$800 per month, \$400 of which will go to the town and \$400 of which will be deducted from Southgate’s bill.

ISSUE DATE 1/18/07