

Verizon plans regional cell network

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Verizon Wireless is in the earliest stages of building a cellular network in the Charlottesville area, which will enable the company to directly provide service to residents.

The second largest wireless company in the nation based on total number of customers, Verizon Wireless has purchased a spectrum license for an undisclosed amount from Urban Comm-North Carolina and is scouting potential locations for cellular signal sites throughout the region. The network will not be completed until 2010, said John Johnson, a Verizon Wireless spokesman.

Currently, Verizon Wireless signals run on Alltel Wireless' network, and Verizon does not sell service to residents in Charlottesville, Albemarle and five surrounding counties.

"This is certainly an area we have wanted to serve for some time," Johnson said. "We are very excited about being able to provide our level of service and reliability in the area."

The company is proposing the placement of antennas and cellular sites on top of a series of rooftops in Charlottesville and Albemarle County, including on the Omni Hotel Charlottesville. The company prefers to locate its antennas on existing structures, camouflaging them so they are "virtually invisible," Johnson said.

Verizon Wireless is also interested in constructing a number of "tree pole towers," a cellular tower ensconced in textured material to make it resemble a tree. Sometimes fake needles and branches are attached to the poles helping to further obscure their true nature, Johnson said.

Towers vetted

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources will vet all proposed cell towers to ensure they don't encroach on any historic resources and the city's Board of Architectural Review will do the same for sites in certain historic areas. The number of cell sites in the region has yet to be determined. An antenna typically has a reach of several miles.

Because Verizon Wireless does not provide service here, its customers are people, especially students, who have moved to region but retained their old cell phones. Verizon Wireless phones in the area are constantly on roaming, and therefore owners do not have access to a range of services, including two-way picture and video messaging and the ability to connect to the Internet and e-mail. Once the network is finished, Verizon Wireless customers will have the full array of services, Johnson said.

The lack of a network has sometimes caused Verizon Wireless service to suffer. Matt Chung, a second-year medical student at the University of Virginia, said that the connection on his Verizon Wireless phone is fuzzy on occasion and that he is disappointed with his inability to access wireless Internet like his friends with different providers.

“It’s not the best because they don’t have their own tower here, but I’ve been pretty pleased with the service,” Chung said.

Expectations high

Once the Verizon Wireless network is up and running, Chung expects that more students will stick with the service.

In mid-July, Verizon Wireless customers were without service for a number of days when the network experienced problems. An Alltel spokesman, Andrew Moreau, said the company made changes to the network at the time that resulted in some “minor” disruptions.

Verizon’s entry into the Charlottesville market would alter the local cellular landscape. But representatives from Alltel Wireless, AT&T Wireless and nTelos all said they were confident that Verizon would not make a dent in their share of the market.

“It won’t change anything we do,” Moreau said, adding that the company has a “leg up” because of its long-standing relationship with customers.