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## Poor local planning, not the APA, to blame for spotty cell phone service

Re March 14 article, “North Country calls go through”: It was disappointing to see local officials in the Adirondacks once again blaming the Adirondack Park Agency [APA] for the lack of cellphone coverage in remote areas of the park. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The APA has approved every cell tower application it has ever received. Most cell companies have had no trouble complying with the agency’s tower policy, which doesn’t set a height restriction but rather requires the tower to blend into its surroundings.

The fact is that the year-round Adirondack population is spread too sparsely in most areas for cell companies to make a profit on new towers. This is due to a lack of local planning and zoning in 85 of the park’s 103 towns and villages. There has been no attempt to direct new development into appropriate locations, where services can be provided more easily and inexpensively.

According to the Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project (May 2009), nine of every 10 homes constructed in the average Adirondack town since 1950 have been built outside a village or hamlet. The park’s overall population continues to rise, yet the population of its villages has fallen over that same period. Most towns have a population density of 14 or fewer people per square mile.

Only 62 percent of the park's towns reported that everyone in their community has access to land line telephone service. Cable TV and broadband Internet access were scarcer still. However, all of the park’s 11 villages have cell service from one or more providers, as do most of the larger hamlets.

Coverage along the Northway was supposed to be the state’s job, via the Office for Technology and a private contractor. Together with the Park Agency, they designed a 64-pole, cellphone/ emergency radio system to blanket the Northway from Lake George to the Canadian border, accommodating up to eight cell companies. Several test poles were erected in 2003. But the cell companies balked at participating — and still refuse to co-locate on the same poles or towers to this day.

Verizon agreed to fill the Northway gaps in response to a personal plea from then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer. Only recently have other companies decided to construct much of anything in the interior of the Adirondack Park.

Businesses recognize that it is hard enough to provide coverage to a mountainous park equal in size to the state of Vermont. Local governments have made the task nearly impossible by allowing haphazard, sprawling development to compound the isolation of the mountains. There is a price to be paid for not planning ahead. Adirondack towns are paying that price right now.

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