

10 November 2011

By email to: ic.reps@aph.gov.au

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Sirs,

The Telecommunications Amendment (Enhancing Community Consultation) Bill 2011

I support Andrew Wilkie's proposed Bill, named above.

I would, however, like to make certain recommendations with regard to this:

- 1. Telcos should be compelled to consider *cumulative EMR* from existing or proposed mobile phone facilities at sensitive sites.** Snowballing proliferation of mobile phone infrastructure means considering EMR output from a single facility in isolation does not represent total human exposure to EMR at sensitive sites. Assessing cumulative EMR exposure more genuinely considers potential health effects.
- 2. Cumulative EMR at sensitive sites should be *at or less than 0.1microwatts/cm2*, in line with world's best practice.** The future health of our nation's children must be protected, given widespread uncertainty about the long-term health effects of this technology. Many locations around the world have declared this EMR exposure level to be safest. Importantly, these places still have successfully operating mobile phone systems.
- 3. Modifications to existing mobile phone facilities should be subject to the *same community consultation requirements as are new facilities*.** Communities have a right to know to what EMR they are being exposed. Potential long-term health effects from mobile phone technology are not confined to new facilities and so communities should be made aware of, and consulted about, any changes to EMR exposure.

I live in Bardon, Brisbane. Two years ago, this community was forced into a 10-month ordeal, when Telstra tried to impose a mobile phone facility onto a residential property, 170m from my daughter's school. With no studies into long-term safety of this technology, and given much higher EMR output from the proposed tower than others in our area, our community instantly galvanised. We demanded a precautionary approach; that this facility be moved to a more suitable location. The ensuing battle represented, literally, months and months in which Telstra and its agents bullied this community – with threats, intimidation, partial truths, outright lies, lengthy delays in correspondence and criticism of our community in the media.

I was one of a dedicated band (including grandmothers, mothers and concerned locals) that delivered hundreds of flyers each week for months on end to residents, keeping them informed of Telstra's latest salvo and what was being done to try to stop this. Pushing my young son in a pram, and walking the extremely hilly streets of our suburb on the hottest of Brisbane days, took a massive emotional toll on my young family and me. I didn't do this for fun or for kudos or for the exercise. I did this because I had always believed we lived in a country that protected its citizens and in which people had rights. I was horrified, when Telstra came bashing at our community's door, to find that communities have no rights in such situations; there are no laws to protect communities; there are no government bodies to which communities can turn for help. It rapidly became obvious that unless communities fight, telcos steamroll right over the top of them. Even if they do fight, telcos still might crush them – but our community instinctively fought.

Hundreds of people spent time, money and emotion fighting Telstra's bid to impose itself. Despite unanimous opposition from residents and school parents, as well as our political representatives at all levels, Telstra arrogantly forged on, telling us there was no alternative but to put the tower where they proposed.

Our community was forced to spend:

- **TIME:** I was one of many who spent untold hours (often until 3am or later, every single week) researching, preparing, writing, laying out, working on a community flyer. Then there was collecting it from the printer the next morning, bundling it for collection by deliverers, emails to coordinate collection of bundles, planning delivery routes, managing routes for people who were sick or unable to complete deliveries, etc. All that as I managed my family life, caring for my young school girl and little boy at home – plus doing my own flyer deliveries. The demands of this were extremely onerous but I simply did not feel that I had any other option.
- **MONEY:** Our community raised (and spent!) \$20,000 to keep this tower away from our children. This is chicken feed to Telstra and the government, but I assure you that's a hell of a lot of sizzled sausages in the heat of summer. Other community members contributed substantial sums of hard-earned money to fight Telstra's plan. And, despite Telstra reporting a \$32billion profit this year alone and shamelessly bragging in its report *Telstra in the Community* (Feb 2011) about how much the company does for communities, our community has not been paid back a single cent of that money. Not. One. Cent.
- **EMOTION:** This period was extremely distressing for our community. We lived in fear of that tower going in and of what that potentially meant for the future health of our children. My husband and I seriously discussed having to sell our beloved home of seven years and move, if this mobile phone facility went in. I know others did the same. All the while, the social injustice of this tormented me. It was utterly disempowering to discover that this huge company could just take away the security and comfort we had from living in this beautiful part of the world; for which we had worked so hard and to be able to give that to our children. Our community's fight is over, but we remain constantly alert, for fear another telco might do the same thing near our daughter's school.

Ten months into this fight, Telstra capitulated – but only when the company finally accepted what we had said all along: That we would not go along with their plans because the proposed site was totally inappropriate. Right from the beginning, we said we would protect our children from the potential danger of this facility. There was no way we would allow our children to possibly be this century's asbestos story. We would settle for nothing less than a precautionary approach. Despite claiming there was no alternative, after 10 months and costing us \$20,000, Telstra agreed to an alternative proposal (one which our community had specifically suggested right at the beginning of the case).

Years after this issue began in Bardon, this community still lives in fear. When will Telstra or another telco return and force us to go through such an ordeal again? If it happens again, we will still be in the same situation because nothing has changed, despite all the distress and stress and fear and intimidation we went through. There are still no laws to protect communities. There is still no government body protecting people in communities all over this country. Sadly, our case is far from isolated. Communities across this country are living this ordeal every day, over and over again. With every new installation, the telcos fine-tune their operation, how they deal with communities, what they say, the resources they roll out, how their (paid) staff learns from it and more. Communities, though, hopefully only go through this once. They must go on a supersonic learning curve with no resources and ordinary people with their own lives trying to fight mega-companies with endless resources at their disposal and significant commercial motivation to make the telecommunications facility happen. It is just not a fair fight. Not at all.

Put yourselves in our shoes: Would *you* like living in fear? Take a look around *your* neighbourhood on your way home tonight... what mobile phone facilities are near *your* children's/grandchildren's/niece's/nephew's schools? If you don't see any, keep an eye out in the next little while because, rest assured, telcos *will* be banging on your community's door soon enough. There are currently no laws to protect your community, so to whom will *you* turn for help?

Andrew Wilkie's Bill begins to redress this gross imbalance of power, to at least give communities some voice. Something *has* to change. Governments are meant to protect their citizens and I remain hopeful that this standing committee will do just that: protect communities. Please contact me if you require further information.

Yours faithfully,

SARAH RODMAN