

SPRINTING UPHILL



by Saxon Henry • Photography by Elizabeth Glasgow

ANY RUNNER who has trained for a marathon understands the true meaning of endurance. A group of residents from the Town of Hempstead, though pushing to new lengths civically rather than physically, have learned to develop a similar stamina. While attempting to exercise control over the quality of their neighborhoods, these community-minded people

have come to understand that their “currency of votes” buys them a competitive edge.

The most recent concern to be addressed by this contingent of moms, dads, business professionals and civic activists began when Merrick’s Michele Walsh, who was taking her children out for pizza in January, spied two men photographing the Granite Building at the corner of Smith Street and Merrick Avenue. When she

stopped to ask them why, she was told that a flagpole would be erected there.

Walsh, who is also president of the Central Merrick Homeowners Association, put the incident out of her mind until a concerned neighbor informed her that a cellular antenna was going to be placed on the flagpole. At the time, Walsh confesses, she had never heard of a cellular antenna.

What she learned about

Michele Walsh, president of the Central Merrick Homeowners Association, is flanked by Derek Donnelly (left) and Edward Grilli (right) at the site of the proposed cell tower at Merrick Avenue and Smith Street. Donnelly is president of the Merrick Gables Association and spokesperson for The Homeowners Joint Council of Merrick. Grilli is the association’s advisor.

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cellular technology as she began to research the subject with the homeowners association's advisor, Ed Grilli, was upsetting, as conflicting reports concerning the safety of the technology surfaced. "If they don't agree on it, why should we have it across the street from our school?" she asks.

Alarm over the proposed Sprint PCS antenna, which would be located across Merrick Avenue from the Chatterton Elementary School, mobilized a number of Merokeans. Derek Donnelly is president of the Merrick Gables Association and spokesman for The Homeowners Joint Council

of Merrick — an organization which he, Walsh, Grilli, Barry Fox (president of the Merrick Park Homeowners Association) and a number of other residents established in late 1999. Donnelly believes that they must do whatever it takes to keep cellular technology away from homes and schools. And, he asserts, there is strength in numbers when it comes to being heard.

Walsh agrees, noting Senator Charles Fuschillo's help in speaking with lobbyists along with Nassau County Executive Thomas Gulotta's "strenuous opposition" to the proposed cell antenna

at the Granite Building. But, she expresses disappointment that neither Senator Charles Schumer nor Congressman Peter King, who both voted to approve the "Telecommunications Act of 1996," were willing to come to their aid.

Walsh relates their lack of response to their voting records because the legislation prevents zoning boards and municipalities from addressing health and environmental concerns with residents. "Maybe they didn't look down the road," she proposes, referring to their approval of the measure.

Due to the bill's restriction, explains Walsh, the only objections



Alarm over the proposed installation of a Sprint PCS antenna across from Chatterton Elementary School (above), mobilized opponents who question the safety of placing cellular telephone masts close to homes and schools.

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that may be used to fight an application during hearings are those related to aesthetic issues and to property values. Donnelly, who was disheartened, but not surprised by the fact that the legislation placed the interests of the telecommunications industry above the potential concerns of American families, says, "I think we have all heard bits and pieces, if not more, about how lobbying works. And so, on that level, it really did not surprise me that our elected officials sold us out."

Whether cellular antennae pose health risks is still being debated. Dr. Henry Lai of the University of Washington has published writings on the subject. In one report, Lai states that, because the intensity of radiation from a cellular telephone mast is very low — mainly due to the distance from the mast, the intensity is generally considered harmless. "However," he writes, "some scientific studies have suggested that exposure to radiation similar in intensity to that from cellular telephone masts is not completely safe."

"There is a lot we don't know about cell towers," says Grilli, "so let's be prudent and avoid areas where old people or young people are going to be exposed." He believes that the skepticism among those who are most concerned has been created by past denials from the Federal Government that breast implants, lead paint and

asbestos were harmful. "Now they tell you that you can't cite health factors when you're talking to local zoning boards about cellular technology, so there is a certain amount of distrust," he remarks.

Hempstead Town Supervisor Richard Guardino is hoping that their efforts in Hempstead will change not only local and county policies, but will impact state and

federal policies as well. "Right now," he says, "all we can do is negotiate to strike a balance, using whatever authority we have. With improved federal legislation, we would have more authority to regulate."

In early 2000, Guardino instituted a task force to this end. Its members have been identifying county, state and municipal land on which cellular antennae can be



Hempstead Town Supervisor Richard Guardino formed a task force to identify suitable sites for cellular antennae on state, county and municipal land.

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placed. The task force enacted a six-month moratorium in March, during which no building permits could be issued for cellular antennae. This gave the members of the task force time to meet with providers as well as time to study open space maps in order to identify what they believe are more suitable locations for the technology.

Vicky Rosenberg, task-force member and Wantagh resident, who had hoped to prevent Sprint PCS from erecting a monopole that is now in place in North Bellmore, credits the Merrick opposition for the amount of

attention now being given to the issue by local legislators. "This brought it absolutely to the forefront. We had already started the task force, but this is what gave it impetus," she explains.

Given the resolve of those opposing cellular antennae near residential neighborhoods, along with the support of local legislators, Donnelly believes that progress is being made. "All sides have been working diligently at preventing the Granite Building installation. I think there will be a solution that works for Merrick and for many other towns on Long

Island, a solution that will keep it away from the people who are most vulnerable," he explains.

Sprint PCS spokeswoman Kathleen Dunleavy says, "We've been working very closely with the town in Merrick. We've come up with two alternative sites and we've submitted them to the town." According to Grilli, both of these alternative locations are in commercial areas near the Long Island Railroad Station. He is hopeful that either the Metropolitan Transportation Authority or the town will approve one of these sites for the cellular antenna that



The original site proposed for the Sprint PCS antenna is not far from this spot on Merrick Avenue, a thoroughfare that the town is working to improve both physically and aesthetically.

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was originally slated for the Granite Building.

All involved believe that a beneficial solution is likely in Merrick. Such is not the case with the Burns Avenue site in North Bellmore — which Grilli calls “the poster boy of bad cell towers” due to its aesthetic impact — as the monopoly is already in place.

With a number of cellular antenna applications from several different providers pending in the Town of Hempstead, Rosenberg, Walsh and Grilli say that they will continue to lobby for change, hoping to prevent other communities from having to endure what they have experienced in Merrick and in North Bellmore.

Donnelly, who follows his ex-Naval captain's caveat, “Don't complain unless you have a solution,” agrees. “I like to look at civics as preserving my right to complain,” he says. “I think people should know that they can make a change. If they see a problem in their community, they should attack it diligently.”

In this contest to protect their communities, these Long Island residents say they will continue to go the distance when it concerns the safety of their families and the quality of their lives, even if they sometimes find themselves facing a difficult uphill climb in the process.

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Saxon Henry of Lake Peekskill is a freelance writer and has written extensively on the cell tower issue.

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