

Residents share gripes on cell masts

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Residents concerned about cell masts going up in their area attended a meeting hosted by Earthlife Africa in Heathfield last week.

Earthlife Africa is a Wynberg-based environmental organisation advocating for the placement of these masts to be regulated.

Around 30 residents attended the meeting on September 3.

Unhappy, and at times emotional, residents were worried about the impact of the cell masts on the health of the poor, elderly, disabled, children and pregnant women.

Cell masts have been placed at churches, work places, hospitals, schools, playgrounds, public areas and private spaces.

Some residents alleged these towers are being placed illegally and those who allow the cell masts on their properties are paid a generous fee from telecommunications companies. Currently there are also cell masts placed on the premises of Grassy Park High School and in CAFDA Village near Prince George Primary School, in close proximity to each other.

Residents at the meeting claim that the City of Cape Town has been allowing to masts to go up without the consultation of residents or the necessary health reports.

The residents at the meeting claimed that since the cell masts were put up in their areas, they

have been experiencing Electro-magnetic Hypersensitivity (EHS).

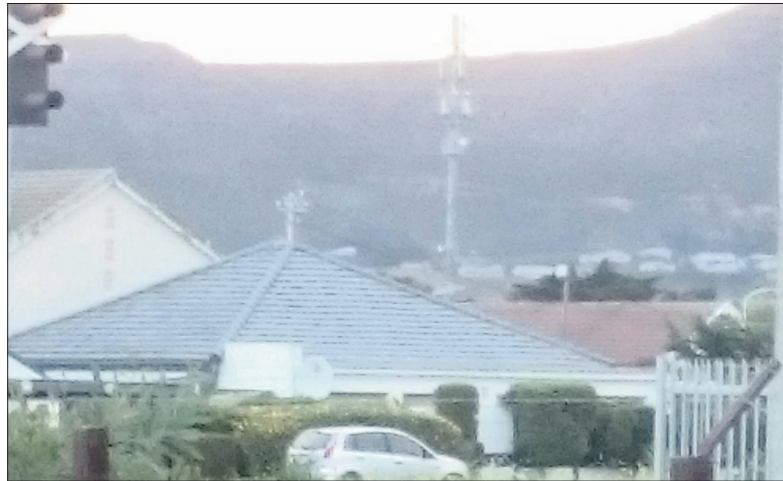
EHS is a condition which causes people to be sensitive to electromagnetic frequencies (EMF) when exposed to it in large quantities. EMF come from cellphones, cell-phone towers, radio and TV towers, wi-fi and microwaves.

According to Electromagnetic Radiation South Africa (EMRSA), from the research they have conducted, those who are exposed to high quantities of EMF over a period of time can have long-term effects on immune and brain functions and hormones.

Due to their own EHS "diagnosis", some residents have claimed that they now suffer from insomnia and dizziness and constantly hear buzzing noises when they are in close proximity to these towers.

Many residents also voiced their concerns about how much radiation people are being exposed to from cell masts. "The question is not if the cell mast creates (EMF) radiation, but what impact this radiation has on the residents living close to the masts," said Muna Lakhani, the branch coordinator of Earthlife Africa, who is also a Wynberg resident.

Mr Lakhani, together with Earthlife, has been actively working for the past 16 years to help tackle the number of cell masts being placed in residential areas. According to Mr Lakhani, "the policy is not clear on how far cell masts



■ A picture of a cell mast taken from a distance at Heathfield station.

should be placed away from residential areas. Some policies mention a 30m and a 50m public safety zone, but only refer to non habitable structures at 50m in line with the antenna, which is the height of the emitting part of the cell mast, but the radiation does spread," said Mr Lakhani.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the guidelines stipulate that the cell masts should be placed at least 400 metres outside of residential areas but residents at the meeting claimed that the distance between cell masts and residential areas are decreasing.

The residents allege that they were not informed about the placement of these cell masts near their

homes. As a result of this, they believe that some of these cell masts are being put up illegally.

"What the local council should do is begin an open and transparent process of public participation with a view to a new policy with standards, and enforceable by-laws at a very minimum – there should also be a longer-term plan (to be included in the policy) of both rationalising the forest of masts as well as protecting the vulnerable people – children, ill people and people with high sensitivity" said Mr Lakhani.

"Your life is as valuable as anyone else. I don't care if you live in Paris, Mumbai or Rio. If that is so, why do countries like Switzerland have a law preventing cell masts

from being placed close to residential areas? What do they know that we don't? We are concerned with how close these cell masts are being placed in vulnerable areas, said Mr Lakhani.

Mother of two Amanda Collins shares these concerns. She travelled all the way from Mitchell's Plain to attend the meeting. Ms Collins broke down in tears when speaking to the group. "My daughter has a mild case of autism and I'm so scared that her condition will deteriorate. The cell mast is literally five steps away from my house. I made an investment when I bought my house; I cannot afford to move out of the area. I am a single parent. We are just the guinea pigs. What do I do if I get cancer and my daughter's health deteriorates? Who will pay my medical bills? The more cell masts that are put up the more radiation we are exposed to," said Ms Collins.

"I felt so alone, but after attending this meeting I feel vindicated. I have been fighting for over a year now and still, nothing has happened. I feel like the politicians don't care," said Ms Collins.

"While there have been some single mast victories, by ourselves and others, the piecemeal approach is problematic. We have so far have successfully mobilised many communities around Cape Town, some representatives could not make the meeting, and more will come on board as time goes on," said Mr Lakhani.



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