

SHEREE BEGA

THERE'S a look of pride on Errol Jacobs' face as he stops his bakkie outside the neat grounds of a church in Eldorado Park.

With some satisfaction, he describes how last week neighbours of the church, which is tucked on a nondescript street in Eldorado Park Extension 2, angrily chased away a team of contractors installing a new cell mast for a network provider.

Jacobs, a local pastor who lives a street away from the proposed mast, maintains that concerns about plummeting property values and the potential health impacts have been ignored.

"We've done our homework on electromagnetic radiation from all these masts," says the burly pastor, who uses prayers to tackle drug abuse in Eldorado Park. "Erecting these towers is like putting minefields all over the place."

Community activist Hilton Dawson warns: "We will physically take these things down. We counted 14 cellular masts in our area. Our question is, when is it enough?"

On the other side of the city, Colleen Fandam and her neighbours feel as if they are fighting a losing battle against the erection of a 30m cell mast in the property of the neighbouring Old Apostolic Church in Craighall Park.

"We really feel like we're fighting a battle we have little hope of winning," she says. "The church is decidedly untrustworthy; the City of Johannesburg is not interested, and the tower companies have very deep pockets."

Both Jacobs and Fandam believe the City of Johannesburg has done little to ensure adequate public participation.

"It doesn't matter where you live – Soweto, Eldorado Park or Sandton – the council and these network providers don't really care about properly consulting with us," insists Jacobs.

In Craighall Park, the council "has failed to respond to any requests for information. Every adjoining neighbour as well as our ratepayers association objected. The City never confirmed receipt of our complaints," says Fandam.

But the council says there's no legal obligation to ensure public participation for the installation of masts and its new reworked cell mast policy will not take in health or property value concerns.

Last month, city spokesperson Virgil James noted that "residents in the northern suburbs have recently voiced their unhappiness with the installation of masts citing cancer, the devaluation of property, blocking of the vista and unsightliness, even though these very same masts allow them to communicate at will."

Across Joburg, he says, community complaints routinely "follow every such erection" of cellular infrastructure.

"South Africa has one of the most advanced telecommunications networks in the world because it promotes socio-economic advancement through the use of technology, facilitated by the Electronics Communication Act.

"This is where it gets rather damning: the act grants public servitudes to network licensees... The

burning question is whether there's any statutory obligation in the current law for an applicant for a cell-phone mast to embark on a public participation process before such application may be approved by the municipality. The answer seems to be no," he says.

The only notice to be given "is to the owner of the property and nobody else", he remarks, adding that the act does not allow for the rights of network licensees to be denied.

James says the City is not unsympathetic to residents' complaints but it is unable to stand in the way of public access to reliable, necessary communication, "be it high-powered cellphone masts, street lights, mobile telephony or aerial and underground fibre".

Arguments put forward regarding property values and the high risk of cancer will not form part of discussions for its new policy, James insists.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has made it clear that there is no convincing evidence that the weak RF signals from base stations and wireless networks cause adverse health effects, he says. "Unless one climbs up a mast and hugs it for a considerable period of time, probably months and months, people and animals in the proximity of cell masts are unlikely to get cancer," James insists.

But this concerns anti-mast advocates like Tracey-Lee Dorny, who runs the Electromagnetic Radiation Research Foundation of SA.

"The City talks about getting cancer only if you hug the tower for a few months," she says, but "people are exposed 24/7 to these emissions that create a myriad health effects."

She says the council needs to consult the public, NGOs and scientific experts with no conflict of interest when reviewing its telecommunications policy.

"The current body of science is enormous and the fact that cell towers affect property values cannot be simply ignored," she says.

"The time for transparency and respect for human rights as per the constitution need to be addressed. Communities should have a right to full public participation," she insists.

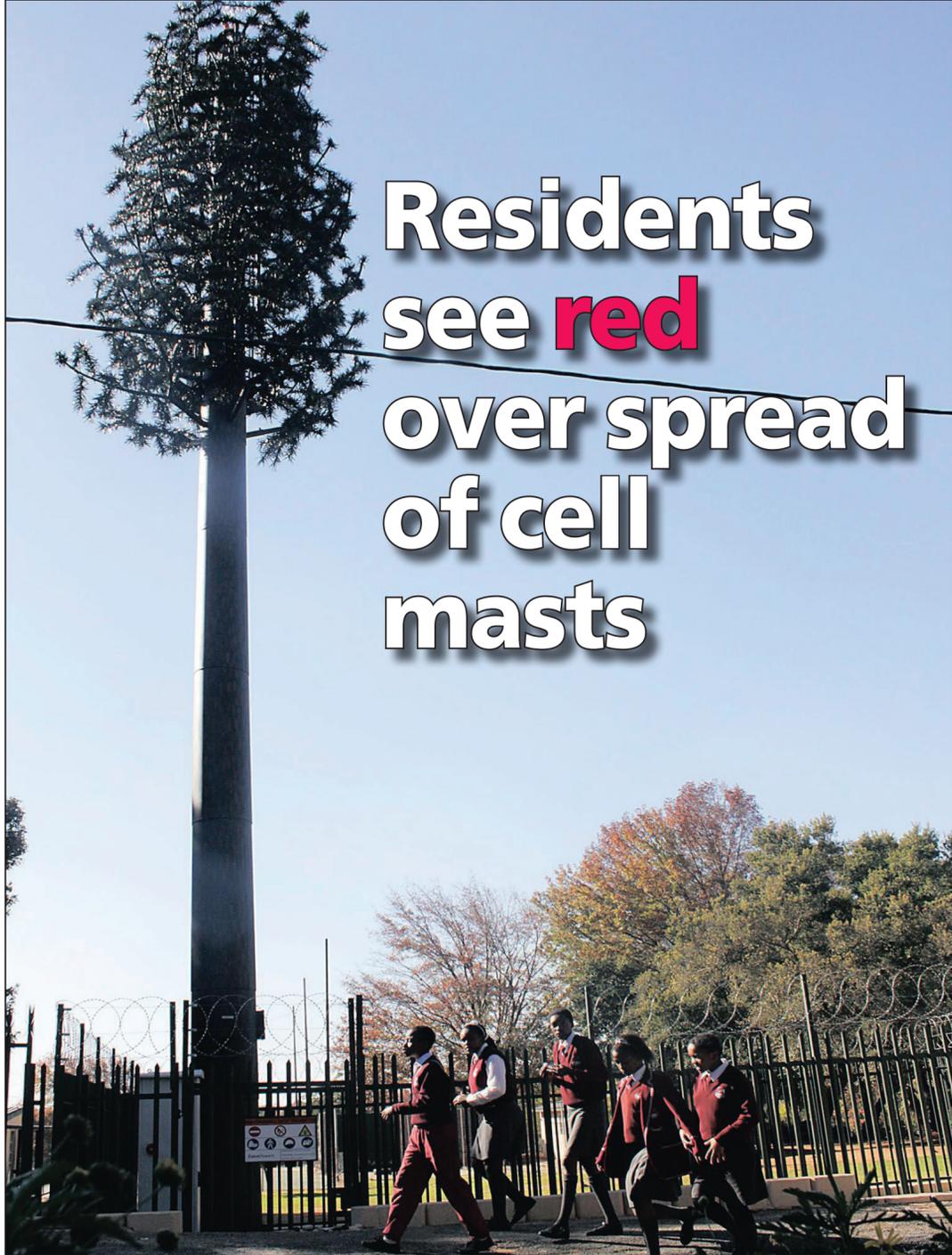
"Fibre is a faster, safer solution for health and the environment." Dorny believes it is critical that cell towers should not be placed in schools and that those that have should be removed to "protect the children of South Africa".

Communities of all socio-economic backgrounds across South Africa are opposing the erection of cell towers and lamp-post towers.

"This opposition is growing, because the public have experienced first-hand the effects on their health, the environment and their property values over the past 20 years," Dorny says.

Thousands of peer reviewed studies have shown the health impacts from electromagnetic pollution, which include central nervous system disorders, thyroid, liver, kidney and hormone disruption, immune dysfunction, ADD, autism, birth defects, sleep disorders, tinnitus, miscarriages and cancers.

South Africa is guided by the WHO and the exposure guidelines published by the International Com-



Schoolchildren walk past a cellphone tower that is situated near two classrooms and a playground inside the Orchards Primary School's yard in Orchards, Joburg.

mission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP), which maintains there is no risk to the health from exposure to the microwave emissions of cellular base stations.

In an October 2014 fact sheet, the WHO noted the "ubiquitous" use of mobile phones, pegging usage at 6.9 billion subscriptions.

"The electromagnetic fields produced by mobile phones are classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer as possibly carcinogenic to humans. Studies are ongoing to more fully assess potential long-term effects."

In May 2015, nearly 200 scientists

submitted an appeal to the UN and the WHO, requesting they adopt more protective exposure guidelines for electromagnetic fields and wireless technology in "the face of increasing evidence of risk".

Professor Walter Meyer, of the physics department at the University of Pretoria, says "the intensity of electromagnetic radiation you receive from a cellphone next to you is probably much higher than that of a base station a few tens of metres away... There is no conclusive proof that electromagnetic radiation at the levels from cellphone base stations can cause any

health effects." But Dawson, who blames Eldorado's proliferation of masts for his headaches and insomnia, will keep fighting.

He carries a petition that garnered over 300 signatures this week "against network providers who place numerous network poles in our areas without proper public participation."

"All these towers are rolled out at schools, shopping centres, churches and old-age homes, because it provides an income for these places, but without explaining allegations of health risks and property

depreciation," Dawson says.

After she considered selling her property in Craighall Park because of the mast, Fandam now rents it out.

"It doesn't really matter what I think the negative health impacts may be.

"It's what the potential buyers of my property think. If given a choice, would you live directly next to a 30m tower or would you buy a similar property elsewhere?"

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