

Report Highlights

Cell Phone Service Coverage in the Commonwealth

Senate Resolution 206 of 2008 calls on the LB&FC to study the improvement and enhancement of telecommunications coverage in the cell phone industry. The LB&FC is to determine the extent to which gaps (no signal or dropped calls) exist in cell phone service for major cell phone providers in the Commonwealth and identify recommendations to reduce or eliminate such gaps in service without unnecessary proliferation of cell towers.

- As of June 2007, the Federal Communications Commission reports 9,200,793 Pennsylvania residents (74%) have cell phone service.
- Lack of cell phone coverage is mostly in the Northern Tier of Pennsylvania, with little of Potter, Cameron and Clinton Counties having cell phone coverage. Other areas of the Commonwealth generally have location- or company-specific dead zones. In a survey of townships, 70% of those responding had at least some dead zones in their townships.
- Gaps in cell phone coverage can result in interruption of or lack of telecommunications coverage. A call is dropped not necessarily because of a dead zone; the tower carrying the call may be at capacity or the call could be dropped when passing to another tower at capacity.
- The solution to most dropped calls and dead zones is to increase the number of cell towers and antennas available for service. Siting cell phone towers, however, is a business decision made by the cell phone or tower companies based on their analysis of the potential market for the service.
- Cell phone and tower companies cite hilly terrain, difficulties in working with state agencies and complex local zoning requirements as factors inhibiting their ability to site cell phone towers and antennas.
- The Commonwealth does not regulate cell phone service and does not have a uniform policy for siting cell phone towers and antennas on Commonwealth-owned property. Some agencies with significant tracts of land have no specific policies for siting these facilities.
- Currently, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has a moratorium on siting cell phone towers in state forests. Siting such towers in state parks is prohibited by statute.
- All stakeholders favor collocation of facilities when possible due to reduced costs and approval times. Many of local ordinances we reviewed specifically encourage collocation.
- The Office of Administration's (OA) Office of Public Safety Radio Systems (OPRS) issued a Request for Information to determine which companies might want to collocate on Commonwealth radio towers in order to get wireless services to underserved areas of the state. Limited interest was expressed.
- **Recommendations:**
 - The General Assembly should consider designating OA as the single point of contact for all Commonwealth agencies for the siting of cell towers and antennas on Commonwealth property.
 - Using this authority, the OA should develop a process to manage the siting of cell phone towers and antennas on state property that includes, e.g., establishing a market-based fee for the use of the tower.
 - OA and pertinent agencies should undertake a complete inventory of all cell phone towers and antennas on Commonwealth property and the associated leases to assure that lease rates are appropriate.