



## The Ross Retort

by Lisa Ross

### FIREFIGHTERS FIGHT CELL TOWER HELL

*Homeowners do it-office owners do it-even synagogues and assisted care units do it-let's do it, let's host a cell tower for some cash.* **Carmel Valley Anthem, begging forgiveness from Cole Porter.**

Carmel Valley will soon be known as the "TEL" place. A myriad of companies with names ending in "-tel," like NEXTEL or PACTEL, are paying as much as a \$1000 a month to Carmel Valley home and building owners, churches and synagogues and even an assisted living facility to turn Carmel Valley and Del Mar into cellular phone tower forests.

With blessings from the City of San Diego, close to a hundred cellular towers will grace Carmel Valley within the next year atop office buildings, hotels, in public parks, and even on the grounds of a synagogue without any public hearing regarding appearance or health concerns.

And unless protests from San Diego City firefighters, fearing communications interruptions and potential health hazards are heeded, three cellular phone towers will adorn the local fire station as well, enhancing the architectural splendor of Carmel Valley's most landscaped challenged building. The city cannot resist a cash stream.

Towers are everywhere, including several on a private home in Del Mar Mesa, a monolith hovering over a park next to Torrey Pines High School, and one recent visually exciting addition to the intersection of El Camino Real and Del Mar Heights Road to welcome folks to Carmel Valley.

Area Planning Board chairs tell me that applications come in regularly from homeowners wanting to make a little cash by installing a tower, cleverly dressed-up in Halloween glory (in all senses of the word), as a chimney or a palm tree, for one of an endless line-up of cellular phone companies.

But mostly, the Chairs are as surprised as anyone else when one more tower pops up in the area because no permit ever passed through the community smell test gamut that developers regularly must traverse.

So far, the Torrey Pines Planning Group has been successful in discouraging individual homeowners from allowing towers to invade residential areas west of the freeway. And, in Torrey Hills, cellular phone towers are being located in appropriate areas already blighted by a power station.

But, companies do not need to seek public review for cellular tower approvals. They do have to pass muster with the city's Development Services Department, a name that tells all. Rarely do these folks turn back a project, and certainly not on aesthetic grounds.

Our local firefighters were the first to cry foul several months ago, screaming into an empty hallway until Carmel Valley's Board Chair Joan Tukey came to their assistance. In appealing the Development Services Department's decision to allow the three towers on their station, these firefighters are joining other public safety workers around the state appealing localities' decisions to make a few bucks at their peril.

The firefighters contend that the towers often interfere with their communications systems. But, they are also worried about health risks because of the length of time they live in the station on a shift. One Santa Barbara fire is suing because several fire fighters report illnesses that impede their ability to serve the public, including symptoms like confusion and vertigo.

But, the San Diego Firefighters must beg and flail in front of the San Diego Planning Commission for redress, a serious and competent group of political appointees, but these are not elected officials, and their decision is final in this case.

The health risk issue is rarely heeded in these hearings because most evidence is epidemiological and a cause-effect relationship between illness and exposure to cellular towers has never been established. In fact, the Telecommunications Bill that spawned this proliferation of competing companies specifically prohibits challenges based on health effects.

Sensible public policy historically suggests using prudent avoidance, which means if public exposure to a possible health risk can be avoided, especially to kids and sick people, just do it, if for no other reason than to avoid costly litigation. But, in the case of Carmel Valley, this caution apparently is blowing in the wind as too many individuals and institutions feel a new cash flow pumping through their veins.

But the concrete issue in this case is incontrovertible: community pride. And for a community that has fought tooth and nail to stay free of the blight that invades too many areas in this city, including putting in place the strictest sign ordinance on the planet, surrendering to this transformation into a stick farm will not go down easy. Let's not do it.