

Testimony—March 19, 2001, Zoning Commission Hearing

My name is Carolyn Sherman, and I live at 4341 Ellicott St, NW. I am asking you to consider very carefully the policy you adopt for allowing cell towers to be built and placed in our community. The questions that matter for every tower decision are these: Is it safe? Is it fair? Is it legal? Who benefits?

Is it safe? Safety matters. Who is the FCC to say that it doesn't? Maybe it doesn't matter to them, but it does to us, and I believe it does to you. Safety from falling ice, safety from kids climbing up on towers built without enough setback, and safety from a technology no one really understands, a technology whose dangers may be catastrophic and irreversible, a technology so recent that no one can say with certainty it is safe. The bottom line is this: no one knows. Experts told us thalidomide was safe. Experts told us smoking was safe. Experts told us asbestos was safe. Experts told us Spring Valley's soil was safe. We're talking about a generation of our children and our grandchildren. We're talking about brain cancer. We're talking about nights in the intensive care unit, hours and hours of pain. Safety matters.

Is it legal? Laws are made to protect the common good. Height restrictions, setback laws, public hearing requirements, all are reasonable laws—laws that must be followed if a tower is to make any pretense of being legal. Just because a DC functionary makes a mistake is no reason to go ahead with a project that is clearly in the interest of no one except a corporation with no roots or interest in our community. Your power comes from us, not from them. They may try to twist the regulations as they will. The intent of the law was never to allow a greedy company from outside to come in and destroy a neighborhood.

Is it fair? The decision to put up a tower must be a product of community input. Large companies must find a way to work productively and respectfully with the people its towers will affect. The idea that they can skulk into a neighborhood and erect something with such an enormous impact on our safety, property values, and quality of life, without giving us one word of input, is an outrage. If we're not safe from this kind of exploitation, neither are you or anyone in this city. Isn't it enough that we don't have a vote in Congress? Shouldn't we at least have a voice in what happens in our neighborhoods? You can make that happen.

Finally, who benefits from a proposed tower? Let's do a quick cost-benefits analysis. We are balancing the cost of unknown and possibly devastating health risks to all of us, the loss of the beauty and serenity of our neighborhoods, and a near-certain decrease in property values, against the benefits of bigger profits for some distant mega-corporation. Where should the Zoning Board come out on this one? I don't think it's a tough decision.

Our quality of life is more important than their profits. I hope you will use this decision as an opportunity to tell the whole country and the world, our neighborhoods are not for sale. You can create a safe, legal, and fair system for meeting our technological needs. A system where we count, our safety counts, and our voices count. Please be careful. Thank you.