

Wi-Fi controversy reignited in Thorold

Trio urges council to move transmitter towers for pilot project away from residential area

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Anca Gaston worries there are strings attached to the wireless broadband network being tested in a Thorold neighbourhood.

Those strings, she fears, lead to a tangled mess of potential health issues that had Gaston, along with a resident of the affected Confederation Heights neighbourhood and a Brock University employee, who becomes physically ill in the presence of Wi-Fi, urging Thorold council Tuesday night to do away with the pilot project altogether or move the transmitters to industrial areas, limiting residents' exposure to potentially harmful radiation they're emitting.

"My recommendation would be to minimize exposure....," said Gaston, a St. Catharines resident. "(It's) a frivolous technology. We've lived with cables for years."

Although Wi-Fi was too new a technology for many studies to conclude there are health risks, Gaston cited those examining potential dangers associated with radiation emanating from other communications transmitters, such as cellphone towers.

The result of such exposure can create a condition called electrohypersensitivity, with symptoms such as cognitive dysfunction, vertigo, depression, irritability and poor sleep, she said. Gaston also cited studies linking the radiation to cancer.

"The presence of Wi-Fi in the community will only worsen the symptoms of people with sensitivities (to radiation) in the community," Gaston said.

That had Coun. Tim Whalen requesting a response to Gaston's concerns from ReliaClear Canada Inc., the company that installed the technology earlier this month. He also reiterated a request for a project status report from ReliaClear, including subscription rates and customer satisfaction.

The suggestion sparked a two-hour debate on the issue, reopening a divide in council that erupted in March when councillors voted narrowly to move ahead with the project.

Mayor Henry D'Angela said ReliaClear was being singled out unfairly.

"We're not looking at the big picture here. We're attacking ReliaClear and Wi-Fi technology when there are other Wi-Fi technologies here," D'Angela said. "If we're going to single out one company, that's inappropriate. My philosophy has been to treat everyone the same."

Coun. Jim Handley feared the request, if obliged, would set a dangerous precedent for council.

"Are we going to eliminate all wireless technology?" Handley asked, pointing to cellphone towers throughout the city.

"Next week, we're going to have someone here with scientific studies about buses.... Jogging behind buses is bad.... Are we going to get rid of buses?"

Handley suggested inviting a Health Canada representative to speak to council about Wi-Fi's potential health risks.

Still, Coun. Shawn Wilson said until there were proven health problems, he would be "hard-pressed to force" ReliaClear to remove the transmitters.

Wilson also said the trio was using "scare tactics" to get its wish.

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