Cell towers on school grounds: Reward or risk?

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TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — For six weeks, hundreds of Benito Middle students had nowhere to store their belongings. The 300 students not issued lockers had to lug 30-pound bookbags, Principal John Sanders said.

To the relief of concerned parents, the school installed gleaming turquoise lockers in mid-October at a cost of $40,000.

But the money didn't come from Hillsborough schools, PTA fundraisers or some other traditional funding source. As school budgets shrink, campuses like Benito have found a financial pipeline in an unlikely and controversial place: cell phone towers.

This year, Hillsborough schools could rake in more than $230,000 from leases on towers.

But some parents say the money isn't worth it. They say the school district is being irresponsible and gambling with students' health without conclusive evidence that towers are safe.

"It's literally pennies a day that each child is getting for having a cell tower there," said Mary Meckley, who wants the district to remove the tower from her son's school, Pride Elementary in New Tampa. "They're hardly getting any money."

Try telling that to cash-strapped administrators who can't afford basics like copy machines and student textbooks.

"Having a revenue source such as this enables us to purchase things we would not be able to without it," Sanders said.

Customer demand for cell phone service is driving the need for towers. The country's more than 262 million wireless subscribers depend on 120,000 towers to route their calls to the appropriate destination.

In residential areas, schools are seen as prime locations for towers, said Stacy Frank, president of Collier Enterprises in Tampa. Since 2006, it has been her job to develop sites with Hillsborough principals and negotiate leases favorable to schools.

Initial leases are for 10 years, and rent rises 3 to 4 percent per year. On average, schools make more than $11,000 annually per carrier. Towers can accommodate up to five carriers.

"Most zoning codes encourage this because of the size of the property," Frank said. "Schools offer a large tract of land in an area that otherwise has smaller tracts and residential uses. From a land use perspective, schools make sense."

Frank said if schools don't cash in on this growing market, another institution — a nearby church, recreational facility or hospital — will. As long as there are cell phones, she said, towers will be around us.

"What people tend not to realize is that they're in the neighborhoods already," she said, rattling off a list of places across Hillsborough with towers. "They're everywhere.

"They'll take that budget money from location A and take it to location C if they can't get into location A," she said. "What the schools are doing is taking advantage of an opportunity at a time when it is economically critical for them."

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Hillsborough's school district erected its first tower at Benito four years after Congress passed a 1996 act limiting the power of local government to stop new towers.

Today, 14 Hillsborough schools lease property to cell phone carriers. Pinellas has six towers. Pasco has one, recently acquired a second and will soon have a third. Hernando did not respond to several requests for information.

Last school year, Hillsborough made more than $86,700 and Pinellas, $128,500.

In Pinellas, the money is set aside for the district's communications system, not individual schools, said Norman Kelton, the district director of network and telecommunications.

Currently, Pasco's portion more than $11,900 this year goes into the district's general fund, but "it is the intent of the superintendent to share those funds back to the classroom," planning supervisor John Letvin said.

South Tampa's Chiaramonte Elementary took in the most of any Hillsborough school, nearly $32,800. The money went toward teacher supplies and student and parent incentives, among other things.

"We went through a lot of lean years," principal Marie Valenti said. "To have this cell tower to purchase the things that we need, it's just truly a blessing."

The last tower went up at Pride in August. More than 300 parents have signed petitions and submitted letters opposing it. They've created a Web site, expellecelltowers.org.

"I'm not against technology," Meckley said. "I love my computer and my cell phone. But we don't need to site these towers where children are."

Coleman Middle in South Tampa doesn't even have its tower yet and the chorus of dissent is already brewing.

Like Pride parents, opponents say cell phone technology is too new. They don't want their children to be anybody's experiment.

"If we end up finding they are safe, then one can go up later," Ari FitzGerald said. "But I don't think we should put it up in a state of ignorance about the potential effects."

No companies have submitted requests for new towers to the Pinellas school district in at least 20 years. And with limited space at a premium, the district's guidelines for new ones are tough, said Kelton, the telecommunications director.

But that doesn't mean Pinellas is immune from health fears. In the past decade, three companies have asked to put new equipment on existing towers. And though each request was approved, School Board members raised health concerns every time.

"I always anticipate that question coming up," Kelton said. "We provide them with literature and research done by the FCC and independent parties that seems to indicate there is basically no risk."

The debate over towers is not confined to Florida. In September, an Oregon district banned them on school grounds. Los Angeles Unified School District took a similar step in 2000.

"We're hoping that our board will reverse their decision just as they did," Meckley said.

Dr. Peter Valberg, a senior health scientist at Gradient Corporation in Cambridge, Mass., an environmental consulting firm, doesn't dismiss Meckley's and FitzGerald's concerns.

"It's not unexpected that people would say, 'It's an untested technology. What do we know about potential health effects,'" Valberg said.

While the cell phone technology is new, radio-frequency waves are not new, he said. "Humanity has a long experience with radio-frequency waves," said Valberg, who has done work on behalf of the World Health Organization and co-authored a 2007 study on towers and health.
That television you watch? Your body absorbs five times more radio-frequency energy from it than a tower.

That FM radio? Ditto.

"What we know about the physics of radio-frequency waves and how they interact with body tissues shows us that cell phone towers would not have a health effect because they are very weak," Valberg said.

It's unlikely that Hillsborough will grant Meckley's wish, school district spokeswoman Linda Cobbe said.

While neither Pasco nor Pinellas has plans for additional towers, four Hillsborough campuses Lake Magdalene and Brooker elementaries, Buchanan Middle and Coleman are negotiating for one of their own.

Coleman principal Michael Hoskinson said the money would cover the cost of classroom technology and field trips for students who can't afford them.

"Everybody's feeling the pinch now," Hoskinson said. "You have to get creative and look for different ways to support a top notch educational program."