

Item 2

GENERAL INFORMATION

Applicant: City of Bloomington

Request: Ordinance to Revise Bell Tower and Steeple Standards,
Thereby Amending Chapter 19 of the City Code

PROPOSAL

Code amendments are proposed for bell towers, steeples, spires and similar auxiliary structures in order to establish height standards and to establish standards for the mounting of antennas. Given the anticipated construction of additional wireless antenna towers camouflaged as bell towers or steeples, it is appropriate to reexamine these standards at this time. Bloomington has recently seen two bell towers used for antenna purposes but currently has no height limit for bell towers or steeples. The proposed ordinance is attached.

ANALYSIS

Why are standards needed?

Bloomington has historically regulated structure height primarily based on proximity to residential property (see Section 19.47). However, Section 19.47 (d) (2) (C) specifically exempts steeples and bell towers from the height limits of Section 19.47. Therefore, there are currently no height limits in place for steeples or bell towers. To ensure compatibility of new bell towers, steeples, spires and similar structures with the residential surroundings of Bloomington churches, height standards are necessary.

The need for standards is enhanced by the fact that multiple additional bell towers and steeples are likely to be proposed in the coming years as wireless companies work with churches to erect additional bell towers and steeples to support wireless antennas. With the ever increasing use of cell phones and other portable electronic devices to access the internet, download videos and music, send photos, etc., wireless providers must provide an ever increasing amount of bandwidth. Delivering increased bandwidth requires reusing the same licensed spectrum in ever smaller “cells”, each with its own set of antennas that need to be mounted on towers or tall buildings.

Most new antennas in Bloomington are colocated on existing buildings or towers. However, as the cells become smaller and smaller and shrink away from any nearby commercial or industrial areas, often there are no buildings or towers suitable for colocation within the cell. In these circumstances, options for antenna mounting include multi-family residential building walls or rooftops (which are rare in some neighborhoods), sirens, light standards in parks, or church bell towers or steeples. Increasingly, wireless providers are leasing space from churches for antenna mounting. The Bloomington City Code prohibits cell towers on residentially zoned church sites but allows bell towers or steeples on such sites when antennas are fully camouflaged within them. Wireless providers have used the bell tower approach twice recently in Bloomington (see attached photos) and staff expects that trend to accelerate.



9801 France Ave. S. - Bell tower with hidden T-Mobile antennas, 63 feet tall with cross



927 E. Old Shakopee Road - Bell tower with hidden T-Mobile antennas, 63 feet tall

What standards are appropriate?

In terms of a height limit, staff recommends 65 feet. The vast majority of bell towers, steeples and spires erected in Bloomington are below 65 feet in height (see analysis below), so we know 65 feet is a height that can work for churches. There have also been bell towers recently introduced in this height range that have not received complaints from neighbors. Staff believes this height to be compatible with nearby residential uses. Based on recent wireless provider actions, 65 feet also appears to be a height that can serve the wireless industry's technical need for antenna height in neighborhoods. The two bell towers in Bloomington with colocated antennas are both in the 60-65 foot height range.

In terms of locational limits (structure setbacks), staff is not proposing to modify those at this time. Current setback requirements provide for a setback of at least 50 feet from property lines abutting a street and at least 25 feet along side and rear property lines.

In terms of antenna mounting, staff believes it is very important that antennas blend in with the bell towers, steeples, spires or similar structures and not call attention to themselves given that most church sites are in residential neighborhoods. Staff proposes standards that require bell towers, steeples, spires, and similar structures not to be identifiable as an antenna tower, to have antennas that are screened and fully hidden from view and to have ground equipment that is fully screened.

Will the new height standards create nonconformities?

Staff analyzed existing freestanding church sites in Bloomington (staff identified 39) using the City’s Pictometry software which allows structure height to be measured with some margin of error. Of these 39 sites, 12 (or 30%) have a bell tower, steeple or spire. The height of those 12 bell towers, steeples and spires is as follows:

Height	Number of Structures
Below 55 feet	4
55 to 65 feet	7
Above 65 feet	1

Given the proposed height limit of 65 feet, only one structure would become legally nonconforming with respect to height. The structure in question is a spire of 70 to 75 feet in height (see photo below). Under State law, this spire could remain indefinitely, could be maintained and even replaced at its current height if necessary. Staff does not believe the nonconforming status of the spire height would have a detrimental impact on the church.



Christ the King Church - 8600 Fremont Ave. S.

RECOMMENDATION

In Case 10000D-07, staff recommends approval of an ordinance to amend Chapter 19 of the City Code to revise standards for bell towers, steeples, spires and similar structures.

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