

Antennas that radiate suspicion

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Now the country's citizens will have great difficulty knowing whether cellular communications sites, which arouse widespread suspicion because of the radiation they emit, are being built in the vicinity of their home. This situation arises from the authorization granted by the National Planning and Construction Council last week.

The council discussed a national master plan for small communication sites (including cellular sites in the form of transmitters and antennas). One of its decisions was that within the framework of National Master Plan 36A, those who build these cellular sites will be able to receive authorization to go ahead and only then apprise those who live within the area of the site. The residents will be able to demand compensation in the wake of such an announcement, but property values will fall because of various construction activities.

The council thus revised a previous proposal that had been put forward by one of its members, Prof. Rachel Alterman from the Haifa Technion. Under her proposal, anyone submitting a request for a permit would have to inform the owners of the properties that border on the planned site before receiving approval to go ahead. This would enable residents to object, if they wish, to the authorization procedures for establishing sites.

The moving force behind the decision to discard Alterman's proposal was Communications Minister Reuven Rivlin. It was because of him that the government requested a second discussion by the National Council of the clause relating to the procedures for granting the approval. Rivlin argued that Alterman's proposal would complicate the procedures for building cellular sites and generate unnecessary negotiations between residents and the cellular companies. The forum of cellular companies, for its part, also argued against the need to announce that a permit had been requested, as the request in any case reaches the local government and the Environment Ministry and as such is open to the public.

The attitude taken by the communications minister reflects a prevailing governmental approach that views residents as a nuisance factor and an obstruction to progress. The same approach underlies the Finance Ministry's idea of establishing a committee to speed up national projects, which will be authorized to reduce the time available to the public to submit objections.

The end result of this method is negative, as it merely makes people more suspicious and heightens their objections to various plans, some of which could in fact improve their quality of life without endangering their health. Instead of putting forward substantive objections that are dealt with in planning institutions or in public forums, people take to the streets to demonstrate against what they perceive to be a threat to their quality of life. They take such steps after learning about the plans after the fact or after being denied full information concerning plans they already knew about.

An amusing example of the establishment's approach to public involvement was provided not long ago by Itamar Ben-Ezer, the chairman of the Shomron local committee for planning and construction, which operates in the area of Zichron Ya'akov and Pardes Hanna. Ben-Ezer was asked to take part in a panel discussion about transportation problems, which was organized by the Association to Promote Binyamina.

In response, Ben Ezer wrote back to the association that he had been astounded to receive the invitation. "To this day I am not aware of any such procedure," he noted. "The only place where plans and master plans are discussed is the local council or a territorial committee [a committee on planning and construction issues]."

Of course, the members of the association had no intention of approving a master plan for the Binyamina area; they only wanted to discuss various proposals for building roads in the area.

The cellular installations are a graphic illustration of the negative by-products that arise when the public is ignored. These are facilities with low radiation, and by scattering many such sites the strength of the radiation in each of them is decreased, thus reducing the health hazard. The cellular companies have so far preferred to conceal them or to establish them before getting the required permits from the local authorities, and thereby they have only heightened the suspicions about their behavior.

Public awareness about the building of cellular sites may be maintained thanks to the local governments, which attacked the proposal of the communications minister. Their argument is that the new decision may well allow action to be taken under the law but contrary to the public interest.

Prof. Alterman says that the local governments have the power to set a series of conditions for those wishing to establish cellular sites, such as the obligation to inform the public about such a move. In the meantime, the local governments have not responded to Alterman's challenge. By taking this line, they will be giving support to their declarations about the public's right to be protected and they will make it possible for the residents of the areas under their jurisdiction to obtain information about planned communications sites.