

Leixlip mast debate continues to rage

**By Peter Kelly
Liffey Champion
4 October 2009**

THE DEBATE over the potential dangers over a Leixlip telecommunications mast poses to human health continues to rage with those arguing the case for both sides as far off as ever.

Steps are being taken by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government to allay locals' fears about the potential risks the mast at Leixlip Garda Station poses to health

But at the same time, elements within Leixlip Town Council remain unconvinced.

In a letter from an official in the Department's Environmental Radiation Policy/ Air Quality Section, a local resident was told the department's advice to those living close to masts is at there is no evidence of health effects on humans.

The resident had previously written to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley, TD (GP) to raise his concern about the potential risk to health from the structure.

Yet on Tuesday night (6th October), Cllr Pat Burke-Walsh (FG) called on Leixlip Town Council to agree to his proposal for Minister Gormley to initiate a study of the effects of radiation, from masts with multiple signals, on human and animal life in Leixlip.

He was also seeking for a moratorium to be put in place on the erection of such masts and called on the Minister for State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works (OPW), Martin Maasergh, TD (FF) to bar the use of the Leixlip Garda Station mast by commercial interests.

"In my opinion and in the opinion of a lot of people, there are still problems with masts," said Pat Burke Walsh, as he pointed out that opposition to such structures within some planning authorities is growing.

Using Sligo County Council's refusal to grant permission for a TETRA mast and Mayo County Council's refusal of mast plans by Hutchison as examples, Cllr Burke-Walsh said he could cite a whole list of other examples.

He added that children attending Scoil Bhride on Green Lane Leixlip are playing in their yard sandwiched between two masts.

The councillor also acknowledged previous assessments of masts in Leixlip that showed emission levels are below the permitted limit but questioned the validity of those reports.

"Some people think it's poppycock but would you ask someone from Volkswagen to assess how safe cars are?" he asked.

"No. There were vested interests in the assessment done before."

Having retired from his position as principal of St Peter Apostle Senior National School in Neilstown in Dublin earlier this year, Cllr Burke-Walsh said one family in that area had been decimated by cancer.

He said that family believed it was caused by radiation from a nearby mast and alleged that gardai in Clondalkin, where a mast is also located, have, and are, dying of cancer.

However, in correspondence sent to the Leixlip resident, the Department official said the advice it is giving to people to those living close to mobile phone base stations, is that there is no scientific basis or evidence of adverse health effects in children or adults as a result of exposure to electromagnetic fields.

He said that advice applied irrespective of the location of the phone mast.

The Government's current policy is based on the findings in an Expert Group Report published in 2007

Health effects

In that report, the group examined a wide-range of issues in relation to the potential health effects of electromagnetic fields, including those produced by mobile phone base stations.

He said the majority scientific opinion is that, to date, no adverse short or long, term effects have been demonstrated from exposure to electromagnetic fields at levels below the limits recommended by the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection.

However, he said a minority group of scientists believe otherwise and extensive international research, co-funded by the Irish Government, continues to be co-ordinated through bodies such as the World Health Organisation.

He said the TETRA system being used in Leixlip, as it is elsewhere around the country to support emergency differs to the standard GSM base stations in that it operates continuously.

But he pointed out the Expert Group did not report evidence that the special features of the signals from the TETRA terminals and repeaters pose a hazard to health.

He added that the views a the Expert Group Report are consistent with the latest findings from the European Commission's own expert advisory group on the subject, the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENHIR).

He said SCENHIR's most recent report, adopted on 19th January this year, found that no health effect had been consistently demonstrated at exposure levels below those established by the ICNIRP in 1998.

In support of the Cllr Burke Walsh's motion, Cllr Shane Fitzgerald (GP) told this week's Town Council meeting that the issue is very important for Leixlip.

Cllr Bernard Caldwell (FF) though, appeared unconvinced saying no one wants to live next to a mast but yet still walk around with mobile phones.

“As a local body all we can do is voice opinions or objections because no one has proved the effect,” he said.

But not wishing to cause panic, Cllr Burke-Walsh said instances of prostate and breast cancer in Leixlip are 24% higher than anywhere else in the country.

While Cllr Catherine Murphy (Ind) said she encountered everything from "fear to terror" when discussing the issue during canvassing in June, she indicated that those figures could be put down to the demographic in Leixlip.

But she said the fact the mast in Leixlip benefited from exempt development, despite the fact it might be used for commercial interest, was wrong.

On Cllr Burke-Walsh's comments that gardai in Dublin have died from Cancer attributed to the masts, Cllr Sean Purcell (Lab) doubted if anyone of them would be “stupid enough to allow a similar structure in Leixlip”, describing such a scenario as “madness”.

Despite that, a deputation of local residents is expected to attend the Town Council's meeting in December to speak on the issue, pending a request to do so being submitted before next month's meeting.