

Vail could have 4G by fall

Town negotiating with a company that would build the new system and lease the technology to cellular carriers

By Lauren Glendenning

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VAIL — Cell coverage in the town of Vail could become much more high-tech by next winter.

Ron Braden, the town's information technology director, told the Vail Town Council on Tuesday that a new deal with Crown Castle North America has the ability to make cell coverage in Vail significantly better.

The town has been negotiating with Crown Castle since last summer on a deal that would have Crown Castle build and maintain a carrier-neutral 4G distributed antenna system cellular network. The town's current system includes several 3G cellular towers for all four major carriers — Verizon, AT&T, Sprint and T-Mobile — which do not support 4G technology.

The new system would provide 4G data services, and also would solve the capacity issue that the town of Vail now experiences during peak usage, Braden wrote in a memo to

the council.

"We (currently) have pretty decent coverage for the most part," Braden said. "But when everyone is on the system at the same time, there are a couple of carriers specifically that don't have the capacity for that."

The distributed antenna system, however, is designed to fix all of that, he said.

The agreement with Crown Castle would also mean the replacement of the town's existing CenturyLink wireless network with a new, "much higher capacity" system, Braden said.

The project is something Vail Town Council members are excited about — members said Tuesday that they often hear complaints about cell coverage and the lack of a 4G network in town, in addition to complaints about the Wi-Fi network.

Councilwoman Susie Tjossem said it would be great to get the message out to guests that cell coverage in Vail is going to be top notch by next ski season.

So far, negotiations with Crown Castle are for a 15-year contract, and Mayor Andy Daly is already thinking toward the end of that contract — he wants to make sure every base is covered in whatever deal the town reaches with the cellular operator.

Daly suggested the town bring on special counsel to negotiate the deal, even after Town Attorney Matt Mire said he felt comfortable moving forward without such counsel. But Daly said it would be worth spending "extra dough to get top-notch advice."

"This is important for us," Daly said.

Mire said Crown Castle has offered to pay the town of Vail \$10,000 toward its legal fees. Daly wants the contract to spell out upgrade requirements, as well as penalties for failing to meet those requirements.

Braden said Crown Castle will absolutely be required to do system upgrades, and the company would be getting pushed by the individual cellular carriers, too, to provide that upgraded technology as it becomes necessary.

"Where we don't want to be is down the road, to get to year 12 on a 15-year contract, and be at 80 percent of capacity and have nowhere to leverage them to increase capacity with three years left in the contract," Daly said.

The deal would mean that Crown Castle would bear the entire cost for installation and maintenance of the system, and in exchange the town would receive cellular coverage in its village parking structure, free use of the network, an updated Wi-Fi network and the option of being a carrier on the system for the recently ratified public safety spectrum, Braden said in his memo.

Braden expects to bring the contract to the council for approval with in the next 30 days. Construction of the system would begin in May, with 4G service available by the fall.

"We just need to knock this out of the ballpark," Councilwoman Kerry Donovan said. "Whatever it takes to make sure that this is to the level that we expect, then we need to do that."