

PUC Chairman Sahr comes to Howard to discuss cell phones, wind energy

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Miner County Pioneer

August 28, 2003

Many Miner County residents have complained about their cell phone service, and according to Public Utilities Commission Chairman Bob Sahr, their voices have been heard.

Sahr and Steve Wegman of the PUC were in Howard Tuesday afternoon, August 26 to meet community leaders in Miner County concerning the quality of cellular phone service in the region as well as wind energy issues.

Mike Knutson of MCCR introduced the PUC Chairman and also praised the announcement of Western Wireless (owned by Cellular One) on putting an antenna tower in the Howard area, which should dramatically improve the overall wireless service.

"We're pretty confident that a tower will be put up," said Knutson. According to Cellular One, the tower and adjoining electronics shelter should be operational by late December.

City Auditor Donna Klinkhammer presented Mr. Sahr with a petition signed by over 400 residents about putting up tower to improve cell phone service in the Howard area. Among those who signed the petition was Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle. "Petitions like this can really make a difference," said Sahr.

The growth in cellular phone usage has been overwhelming. Small rural counties are using the new technology even more than urban areas. Farmers need mobile communications for emergencies and because they are on the move throughout their day. There are now more wireless and cell phones than land lines.

Sahr said the wireless service is also important in rural communities attempting to attract business and in the people's own quality of life.

Emergency communications is also vital. Sahr

pointed to the recent tornado in Parker and the lack of good cell phone service that made important communications difficult. The PUC has been in dialogue with these wireless companies encouraging them to invest in small town and are making steps to insure this.

"These companies don't want to be regulated, but the PUC needs to be there for the consumer," Sahr said.

"These companies need to know if they provide a good cell phone service, the consumer is willing to pay a fair price. Good service means long-term customers for them," said Sahr.

One of the reasons companies are slow to invest in rural areas is the cost of a tower which can range from \$100,000 to \$250,000.

Sahr is also encouraged sharing space with other providers with one tower.

It was also pointed out that a private company Integrated Tower out of Yankton is making plans to build a 199-ft. tower northeast of Howard.

The forum also provided an opportunity to learn more about the status of wind energy development in Miner County. Each of the three incorporated communities, Carthage, Canova, and Howard each own and operate wind turbines.