

Towers in Hawley needed, Air Force spokesman says

By Dianne Cutillo

HAWLEY — An Air Force spokesman said the proposed towers in this town and Ashfield will be part of a Northeast Regional Communications facility that will improve the communications flow for the Department of Defense and about 19 other federal agencies.

Capt. Philip Weber, a public affairs officer at Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee, said the federal government needs improved communications capabilities because of the saturation of communications companies along traditional air waves.

Weber said a total of 40 towers are proposed, with one that may reach 300 feet in height and the remaining slated to be up to 240 feet. The "towers," which would act as the transmitter site in the Northeast center, would not all look like the type of towers that line an electrical right of way, some would consist of "just a lot of wires," he said.

To cost \$23 million

It will be a year to a year-and-a-half before construction begins on the \$22.7 million plan. Construction would be done by the Army Corps of Engineers, Weber said.

Much of that time will be used to complete an environmental impact statement that the Air Force has commissioned Oakridge National Laboratories of Oakridge, Tenn. to do, Weber said.

Weber said that statement will address all of the concerns raised by residents in Hawley, who said they oppose the project because it could have a negative impact on the town's economic condition, the environment and agriculture.

One resident solicited and received the support of the Franklin County Commissioners yesterday in opposing the project. Jay Kapsnow of Hawley, one of a group of opponents, said the commissioners will provide legal support and will write to the County Commissioners in bordering Hampshire and Berkshire counties because of the site's proximity to Hampshire and Berkshire towns. Hawley borders Savoy on the east.

Weber said the environmental study will include further tests of

the suitability of the site.

Weber said the Hawley site was chosen, after 31 sites in New England and New York were considered, as the best site for several reasons. First, because Hawley is not near a major city and is at an elevation where there would not be problems with interference from regular communications signals like telephones.

Site preparation costs for the proposed site, a 600-acre parcel, 450 acres of which are in Hawley with the balance in Ashfield, would also be minimal because the area is a potato farm and is cleared and flat, Weber said.

Other considerations included Hawley's proximity to Granby, where a receiver site will be constructed on a federally owned former communications site for the Strategic Air Command, and to Westover Air Force Base, where 60 civilian operators who will be part of the communications system will be stationed, Weber said.

Weber said the transmitter site had to be at least 17 miles away from the receiver site at Granby to avoid interference with the radio waves. He said an intermediate microwave site would need to be erected, probably at an existing microwave site atop Mount Tom in Holyoke.

Hawley first choice

Three other sites were chosen as finalists, and environmental impact statements are being prepared for them as well, Weber said, though Hawley is to date the first choice. The other sites being investigated are in Barre, West Warren and Westbrook.

Weber said similar communications systems exist and more are being planned nationally, but he said he did not know how many such systems there are or will be. "That information may be classified," he added.

Besides the Department of De-

fense, the system will be used by other federal agencies such as the state, energy, justice and transportation departments, the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, the United States Information Agency, Veterans Administration and the Federal Communications and Nuclear Regulatory commissions, Weber said.

The system will be used for "message traffic" that includes written information transmitted by teletype as well as voice transmission. Intelligence information could be transmitted in coded form, but Weber said emphatically that the system could not be used for surveillance.

Hawley Planning Board Chairman Earl Pope said that at an informational meeting about the project last week Air Force officials agreed to follow local permitting procedures for the project. Weber said he did not know "if the town could refuse" and referred an Eagle reporter to the Army Corps of Engineers to answer that question. None of about six corps officials reached yesterday said they could answer that question because they were not aware of the project.

Weber did say that though the Air Force does not like to, it would take needed property by eminent domain if property owners would not sell.

The Planning Board will meet tomorrow at 8 p.m. at the Town Hall to discuss the project.