Top Tower Companies Continue to Grow

SNL Kagan recently reported the top 69 tower companies by location, explaining that the leading tower companies have grown locations at a 2.8% compound annual growth rate since 2009, driven by smartphone growth and LTE build-outs. “We estimate the top 69 tower owners ended 2014 with 124,749 active and in-development tower and distributed antenna system locations in the U.S.,” John Fletcher wrote. SNL Kagan doesn’t include small cells in this report, and they anticipate the tower growth to remain strong in the medium term as 4G densification continues. In addition, FirstNet, with its pockets full of AWS-3 cash, can now start seriously planning the nationwide rollout of its first responder wireless network. At the end of 2014, Crown Castle was the largest tower company with more than 40,000 U.S. towers, with American Tower in second with 28,996 towers, SBA at 18,237, and the next four in line being the wireless carriers: Verizon, AT&T, U.S. Cellular, and T-Mobile. “For six years, Crown Castle has retained its No. 1 position as the largest U.S. wireless communication tower owner. But Crown Castle’s dominance will come to an end with the closing of the American Tower/Verizon Wireless deal. American Tower’s acquisition of 11,448 Verizon Wireless towers will eventually put it just ahead of Crown Castle with a pro forma total tower count of 40,444. The deal, which had not closed as of year-end 2014, was completed on March 30,” Fletcher explained. “Of note, we added CiG Wireless to our table; the publicly traded company is relatively new and aggressively acquiring its way into the market. And TowerCo LLC, after its large 2012 exit to SBA, has also been quickly rebuilding its portfolio. It ended 2014 with more than 1,000 towers, making it the 11th-largest tower company in the U.S.”

EGPI Firecreek Signs LOI for Empath Towers

EGPI Firecreek, who focuses on the broadband sector, including line, antenna, and tower modification, announced the signing of a Letter of Intent (LOI) to acquire broadband and cell tower industry experts, Empath Towers. Empath Towers is a contract staffing business specializing in the broadband cable and cellular tower industry. And while most work through Empath Towers is subcontracted, EGPI Firecreek believes there are opportunities for growth through internal crews which will then require capital expenditures (vehicle lease, trailer and tools). Empath Towers currently has customer contracts in place with the largest tower owners in the U.S., as well as several of the largest public and private general contractors and systems integrators serving the cell tower industry. Fred Sussman, Empath Towers LLC, CEO, stated, “We look forward to being a part of the EGPI Firecreek organization. Our relationship with EGPI Firecreek via this acquisition will help to provide us the proper capitalization needed to grow revenues both organically and through acquisitions. This
essentially will allow us to build Empath into a leader in the cell tower services industry, as consumer demand for mobile services continues to show insatiable growth. We are confident that Empath will soon be positioned to be an integral part of satisfying that demand.

**Landline Outages Causes Concern**

When landline service went out over the weekend in Rockingham County, Virginia, nearly 100 residents were affected. While service has been restored, the mishap highlighted some safety concerns. Some of the residents in the county live close to the mountains and often can’t get a reliable cell phone signal. When the landline service is down, they are left without a way to reach 911. It's very serious. Especially for people that have lifeline services because there’s no way for them to contact 911 and if you are out in a rural area...you may have to travel a mile or a couple of miles to even get to somebody to get help so it's a very serious deal that could affect someone’s life," Fire Chief of Rockingham County Jeremy Holloway said. (WHSV-TV) Some residents even have to walk to the 257 Grocery Store to get cell phone reception. Officials are looking into adding a tower to the area, but for now they’re working with the phone companies so responders are notified immediately if a large-scale outage happens. No one was aware of the landline outage until WHSV-TV called emergency responders about it.

**Tammany Parish Tower Complete**

A 450-foot tower built in Tammany Parish, Louisiana, has recently been completed. The tower is part of a $14 million public communications system in the parish. "This is the beginning of a new era in emergency communication, a new era in the way we protect our citizens in any emergency," Parish President Pat Brister said. "The tower is a physical symbol of the hard work and effort by members of your parish government as well as a symbol of the reality of St. Tammany stepping into the future of radio communication." (NOLA.com) The whole communications system is expected to be completed in November, and it will include seven other towers in surrounding areas. The towers will all be connected to a master site in Baton Rouge, which is the hub of the Louisiana Wireless Information Network system. The new tower will allow first responders and emergency personnel to communicate effectively with each other and with the citizens of St. Tammany Parish.

**Who Owns the Water Tank?**

A new cell phone tower will be built in the Airport Authority business park in Martinsburg, West Virginia. The Eastern Regional Airport Authority approved a lease agreement with Shenandoah Mobile, doing business as Shentel. The company will pay the Airport Authority $1,000 a month for the land where they will construct a 170-foot tower. Originally, the company wanted to install antennas on the nearby water tower, but when going to finalize the deal the district couldn’t find a clear title to the tower that was built in 1997. The Airport Authority assumed the Water District owned the water tower as they maintain it, insure it, and supply it with water, but they couldn’t find a record about which agency owned the tank. In 2014, the Water District approached the Authority to clear up the ownership question. According to the Journal-News, “Airport Authority members were going to sign an agreement conveying ownership of the tower to the water district at no cost, until they found out about the water district's pending agreement with Shentel and how much money the water district would be getting for leasing space on the tank for cell phone antennae. Airport Authority members
voted in July to renegotiate their agreement with the water district, asking for payment of $300 year, the authority's standard land lease payment for the property on which the tank is located." The District officials refused to pay anything for the water tank, and they were at a stalemate. Shentel officials approached the airport manager to discuss leasing land from the Authority. Shentel's lease agreement with the Airport Authority includes a 3 percent lease payment increase each year. If any other carriers co-locate on the tower, Shentel will pay the Airport Authority 15% of that lease agreement.

Spanish Tower Unit Going Public

Abertis, a Spanish infrastructure company, announced they would spin off their wireless telecommunications tower sector, Cellnex Telecom, in an initial public offering. Cellnex will seek to list its shares on stock exchanges in Barcelona, Bilbao, Madrid and Valencia, Abertis said. Abertis owns 100% of Cellnex, and plans to sell 55% stake in the business to institutional investors inside and outside Spain, the New York Times reported. Since it began operating in 2000, Cellnex has “become the leading independent infrastructure operator for wireless broadcasting telecommunications in Europe, with a strong platform for growth,” Tobias Martínez, its chief executive, said in a news release. Cellnex, based in Barcelona, operates more than 15,000 wireless towers and broadband locations in Spain and Italy. It had 436 million euros, or about $479 million, in revenue in 2014 and employs 1,200 people. (New York Times)

$200,000 in Damage to Tower

The Grant County Sheriff's Department in Washington reported damage to a cell phone tower site in Stratford. Authorities reported that suspects caused up to $200,000 in damage. Inland Cellular reported the damage on April 2, and authorities found damage to three sides of the building that houses the tower equipment. The electronics weren’t damaged and cell service remained uninterrupted. However, investigators believe that the damage was caused with a vehicle, and that vehicle should have noticeable rear end damage.
Rejected in Clintonville

The Clintonville Area Commission members in Ohio rejected a variance request that would have allowed Verizon to place a concealed antenna atop a building. Verizon’s request was originally slated for the February meeting, and then again in March, but Verizon’s representatives delayed the meeting so they could address concerns and issues raised by residents. At the April 2 meeting, Verizon’s real estate project manager for central Ohio explained the need for the antenna, and that it would help eliminate dropped calls. Many residents are concerned about the potential health effects of the antenna, especially because it would be about 40 feet from Clinton Elementary. Only one supporter of the antenna, a Verizon customer, spoke at last week’s meeting explaining there were having problems with service. However, the Commission ultimately rejected the request 4-3.

Training Tower Ticks off Residents

Tower Holdings is trying to construct a 180-foot training tower on its property in Farmington, Connecticut. But the town and its residents are fighting the proposal. Tower Holdings’ property currently contains a commercial building where Northeast Towers is headquartered. One neighbor complained that the tower isn’t needed and the company could conduct training anywhere in the northeast. The company is partnering with AT&T to add a panel antenna array on the tower to fix a gap in coverage, but neighbors feel the antenna was added to circumvent the town approval. "The Connecticut Siting Council has exclusive jurisdiction over the siting of telecommunications facilities such as the one Tower Holdings LLC has proposed," said Jesse Langer, the attorney representing Tower Holdings. "Tower Holdings respects the council’s exclusive jurisdiction, but met with the town on several occasions, including two public information meetings, because Tower Holdings and its affiliates have been longtime corporate residents of the town and they wanted to be good corporate neighbors.” (Hartford Courant) The company asked the Planning and Zoning Commission in March 2013 to make an informal presentation regarding the training tower. However, once the company partnered with AT&T they withdrew their request as the application had to be submitted to the Siting Council instead. Residents have until April 16 to file letters, briefs, or petitions, and the Siting Council is expected to give their opinion after that.

Possible AT&T Tower at Elementary School

AT&T officials have requested a permit and development review at a Santa Clarita Planning Commission in California to discuss a potential new tower. Sulphur Springs School Board member, Kerry Clegg, said the reception would improve tremendously at Golden Oak Elementary as the school is in a dead zone. Right now, the town uses a backup radio system for emergencies since cell coverage is unreliable. The proposed tower would be 52 feet tall, and concealed as a clock tower. It would be placed at the entrance of the school on top of a hill. If approved, construction could begin within the next three months. “The tower was confirmed with local and district approval over a year ago but the city of Santa Clarita wanted to be involved in the process and required AT&T to resubmit the proposal through the planning commission,” Clegg said. “The district has had many public hearings and board meetings on the tower with nobody voicing any concerns about the tower.” (Hometown Station)