



Small Cell and Wireless Facilities FAQs

Information about Small Cell Wireless Facilities in the Public Rights-of-Way

The following information is a general overview with answers to frequently asked questions about “small cell” wireless facilities, also known as “small wireless facilities”, in the City’s public rights-of-way. Examples of small cells include certain antennas and radio equipment installed on streetlight and utility poles along City streets and medians.

Federal and State Law

Wireless carriers are regulated under federal and California state law, including by the California Public Utilities Commission.

Federal law preserves local governments’ authority to regulate the placement, construction, and modification of wireless facilities subject to specific limitations. These limitations on a local government’s authority provide that local governments cannot:

1. Regulate the placement of wireless facilities on the basis of the environmental effects of radio frequency emissions if the site is compliant with the Federal Communications Commission’s standards;
2. Unreasonably discriminate among providers of functionally equivalent services; or
3. Prohibit or have the effect of prohibiting the provision of wireless services.

California state law also grants wireless carriers a limited authorization to install wireless facilities and wires, such as fiber optic lines, in the public right-of-way (California Public Utilities Code Section 7901). However, state law as interpreted by the California Supreme Court provides cities with the right to exercise reasonable control as to the time, place, and manner that the public rights-of-way are temporarily accessed for initial construction and installation (California Public Utilities Code Section 7901.1; T-Mobile W. LLC v. San Francisco, 6 Cal.5th 1107 (2019)).

Federal regulations also require local governments to process and make decisions on small cell permit applications within certain periods of time known as “shot clocks”. Under the Code of Federal Regulations, Chapter 47, Section 1.6003, the City must complete all administrative processing of a small cell application within as little as 60 days (for attachments to existing structures) and at most 90 days (for attachments to new structures). The City’s failure to act within those federally mandated timelines or “shot clocks” can result in an application being deemed approved by state law (California Government Code Section 65964.1).

City of Torrance Regulations

Following periods of public comment and feedback, the City Council adopted Wireless Policy Number 1 concerning Small Wireless Facilities on January 8, 2019, with additional revisions adopted on August 10, 2021, to exercise the City’s limited control over small cell wireless facilities under federal and state law. The policy regulates small cell location requirements, design standards, permit applications, and conditions of approval for permits.

For example, with respect to location preferences, the policy discourages, but cannot prohibit, applicants (that is, a wireless carrier or similar infrastructure company) from proposing to locate facilities near residences and historic resources or within the Hillside and Local Coastal Overlay Zone or a designated scenic corridor. The policy’s design standards enable the City to regulate the aesthetics of these proposed facilities to the extent allowed under applicable law.

Under the policy, qualifying “tier 1” small cell permit applications require posted public notice at the project site and are reviewed and decided over-the-counter without a public hearing. All other small cell permit applications for facilities (1) proposed in a discouraged location, (2) on a discouraged support structure, (3) without a qualifying preapproved design, or (4) that otherwise require a limited exception to the policy are classified as “tier 2” small cell permit applications. Such “tier 2” small cell permit applications require posted public notice at the project site, as well as public notice mailed to properties and owners within 300 feet of the proposed site, and are administratively reviewed and decided by the Community Development Department Director or the Director’s designee without a public hearing. The City will also accept public comments that evaluate a “tier 2” application for compliance with the policy’s location requirements and design standards. All decisions about small cell permit applications are final and not subject to administrative appeals. These review procedures are specifically designed to complete the application process within the applicable shot clocks and avoid applications from being deemed approved by state law.

Macro wireless facilities, such as traditional cell towers installed on a privately-owned building or property, are separately regulated by the City’s Community Development Department under Division 9 (Land Use), Chapter 2 (General Provisions), Article 39 (Wireless Telecommunication Facilities) of the Torrance Municipal Code.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What is a "small cell site"?

As wireless carriers move to modernize their networks, they are turning to a new form of technology deployment commonly referred to as a “small cell site.” These are called small cell sites to distinguish them from much larger “macro cell sites.” Macro cell sites are large (often purpose-built) structures with fiber-optic cables, antennas, and supporting ground equipment. You have probably seen one while driving along a freeway or city streets, possibly disguised as a palm or pine tree. Sometimes, macro cell sites are mounted on top of buildings and hidden behind a parapet or within a cupola.

Small cell sites are more compact in design compared to macro cell sites. They can often be installed on existing infrastructure, such as streetlights and wooden utility poles. Small cell sites are designed to provide service to a more limited area and increase network capacity by reducing the number of overall users connected to the nearest macro cell. By reducing the size of the cell, wireless carriers can reuse the same frequencies over dense areas by deploying more small cell sites to provide desired levels of service.

Where in the City are small cell sites being installed?

Small cell sites are currently being installed by various wireless carriers on streetlight poles, wooden utility poles and new purpose-built steel or concrete poles. In certain cases, the structure on which the small cell site will be installed must be replaced with a stronger structure that can support the new facility. The City prefers that wireless carriers install small cell sites at locations where suitable infrastructure already exists, such as a streetlight or a utility pole.

Why are small cell sites being installed in the City?

Small cell sites are being deployed by wireless carriers to address network coverage and capacity issues in the City. Descriptions of each type of issue are provided below.

Network coverage issue: A network problem where a carrier does not have adequate signal coverage in an area. These are areas where cell phones receive no coverage or very little coverage. You may notice coverage issues when you have few or zero bars for service on your cell phone. Small cell sites can help add coverage to the network.

Network capacity issue: A network problem where a carrier has wireless coverage in an area, but the number of network users (e.g., people with cell phones) overwhelm the existing cell sites covering that area. You may notice capacity issues when you are at a large event and appear to have a strong signal, but your calls or text messages continuously fail. Small cell sites can help add more capacity to the network.

Who do small cell sites serve, and what companies operate them?

Small cell sites are generally installed to serve the subscribers of the major carriers: AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon. The carriers may contract wireless infrastructure companies to install small cell sites on their behalf. For this reason, you may see different names on wireless facility applications and equipment such as Crown Castle or Mobilitie.

Can the City prohibit wireless facilities?

No. Federal law provides that local governments may not prohibit or effectively prohibit the provision of personal wireless services. (47 U.S.C. section 332(c)(7)(B)(i)(II)).

Has Torrance adopted any regulations regarding wireless facilities?

Yes. The City regulates wireless facilities consistent with the limitations under federal and state law. The City provides a detailed application submittal and approval process, design standards, location requirements, standard conditions of approval, and a pre-approved design process. (City of Torrance Wireless Policy Number 1).

What types of regulations exist regarding radio frequency safety?

The FCC adopted regulations regarding human exposure to radio frequency emissions. The City will not permit a wireless facility that does not demonstrate planned compliance with the FCC's regulations. (FCC RF Safety FAQ).

Can the City adopt radio frequency safety regulations that are stricter than the FCC's regulations?

No. The City is prohibited from regulating wireless facilities on the basis of the environmental effects of radio frequency emissions if the site meets the FCC's requirements. Environmental effects of radio frequency emissions include those related to human exposure.

Are the wireless carriers required to get a permit from the City to install a wireless facility?

Yes. If you observe unpermitted work being performed related to a wireless facility in the public rights-of-way, contact the Community Development Department, Engineering Division, at 310-618-5898.

How does a wireless carrier get a permit to install a new small cell wireless facility?

The following steps are generally involved to obtain a small cell permit to install a new wireless facility in the public right-of-way:

1. Application: The carrier submits an application to the Community Development Department to install a small wireless facility.
2. Review: Community Development Department staff reviews the application to ensure that it is complete.
3. Applicant Corrections: If the application is incomplete, City staff informs the applicant what information/corrections are required to make the application complete.
4. Final Review: Once the City has a complete application, the Community Development Department Director or the Director's designee reviews the application for compliance with the City's policy and other applicable laws and makes a decision that either approves, conditionally approves or denies the application.

Can the "shot clock" for review of a small wireless facility application be extended or paused for additional review, community meetings, or any other reason?

Applicable laws and regulations also do not allow the City to unilaterally pause (or "toll") an application's "shot clock". Moreover, any mandatory pre-application review, community meeting, or public hearing must be completed, in addition to the City's review of the application, within a single 60 or 90-day shot clock. Although City staff would likely support community meetings, the extra time required to notice and conduct such meetings would require consent from the applicant. If there is a specific application that you believe should be discussed at a community meeting, the City recommends that you reach out to the applicant's representative to request that the applicant voluntarily toll the associated application "shot clock" so a community meeting can be held. Contact information for any an applicant's representative can be found in the application's public notice materials, or by contacting Community Development Department staff at CDDInfo@TorranceCA.gov.

What do I do if I have a complaint about the location of a proposed small wireless facility?

Federal law and the City's policy provides that any denial of a wireless application must be in writing and supported by substantial evidence contained in a written record. In this context, "substantial evidence" means site-specific information in the record that would allow a reasonable person to conclude that the proposed facility is not compliant with one or more required findings for approval under the City's policy.

Generalized concerns about wireless facilities (for instance, "all cell towers are ugly" or "cell towers reduce residential property values") typically do not meet this standard, whereas site-specific information (for instance, "this cell tower will adversely affect an historic resource across the street" or "based on an appraisal report, a cell tower at this location would reduce the adjacent property's value by XX%") are stronger evidence.

If you believe a specific proposed small wireless facility will not comply with provisions of the City's small cell policy, please submit specific supporting information in writing to the Community Development Department at CDDInfo@TorranceCA.gov so that City staff may evaluate it as part of the application decision making process. Please note that generalized statements are not legally sufficient to support a denial.

I have more questions. Who should I contact?

Please contact the Community Development Department at CDDInfo@TorranceCA.gov.