



GUNFLINT TRAIL VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

OPEN LETTER

www.gunflint911.org

March 5, 2018

RE: ARMER Tower

There's a proposed new ARMER tower that will be installed this summer at the GTVFD Fire Hall #3 on Seagull Access Road. This has created a host of emails, blogs, claims and questions that need to be addressed and clarified.

Let's start with **ARMER (Allied Radio Matrix for Emergency Response)**. Following major catastrophes like 911 and Katrina, a glaring shortcoming of the emergency response was the inability of the various agencies to communicate with each other. Most had their own radio channels and frequencies with no commonality to interact. Thus, a concerted effort has been forthcoming to rectify those issues.

ARMER is Minnesota's program to connect agencies and departments. The State of Minnesota legislature mandated MnDOT (MN Department of Transportation) to install and/or use a series of towers throughout the state to connect agencies under one communication system. This process is still on going. Currently the Gunflint Trail has two primary towers at Gunflint Lake and Mid-Trail and the ARMER system was put on those towers.

Most of the land in Minnesota is relatively flat making coverage in those areas easier to accomplish. Our topography in NE Minnesota is far different. The hills and valleys are obstructions to radio signals. As a result, the end of the Gunflint Trail, primarily from the Seagull Guard Station to the end, has limited or no radio coverage at all. This is a significant and dangerous hinderance to emergency responders.

The GTVFD, Search and Rescue and the Sheriff's department have numerous firsthand experiences trying to manage emergencies without the ability to communicate. We've had medical emergencies where help and equipment were literally a few blocks away but responders were heading in opposite directions because we couldn't talk to each other.

Priority #1 for all EMS personnel is your personal safety. Don't complicate an already heightened situation by making yourself a victim rather than a responder. Communication is paramount. From the large multi-agency events like the Blowdown of 1999 or the Ham Lake fire of 2007 to simply responding to a CO detector that has been activated, having the ability to communicate is one of the most important tools in our arsenal.

Is the proposed radio tower necessary? If you're sitting at home in front of your fireplace on a rainy night you probably don't see the need for the tower. It's when you're in a canoe on a search and rescue mission battling the wind and waves and need assistance, or you found the lost party or you've completed the search of your

designated area and need instructions where to go next....that's when you'll realize that there is a critical need for radio communication. Or if you've responded to a scene and discovered that the address given was incorrect and need to pass that information to others. What would change your perspective as you sit by your fireplace is when the emergency responders are called to **your** house.

There was a process to address the communication need. MnDOT, Cook County and the GTVFD collaborated to identify the need and examine all options to correct it. Options discussed ranged from a 180' tower at the Seagull Guard station, other possible sites and tower heights and finally the 80' tower at Hall #3.

A headline in a recent blog that stated, "Coming soon to Seagull Lake – 80-foot radio tower for your viewing pleasure!" The headline was meant to have been sarcastic, but the author has no idea how accurate it really was. **The visual impact of the tower was as important as the goal to have radio service coverage.** In order to keep the tower at a minimum of 80', we could use a dedicated broadband line to connect to the primary tower at Gunflint Lake. That means we didn't have to erect a tower tall enough to make a line-of-sight connection. The tower only had to be tall enough to provide radio coverage for the end of the Gunflint Trail.

Of course, there was a cost associated with bringing the fiber optic line to the tower site. This was an expense that MnDOT was not authorized to cover because there were other options. The **GTVFD** has agreed to fund the cost of the fiber optic line estimated to be around \$10,000. The reason we chose this option was **"for your viewing pleasure!"**.

Another reason why Hall #3 was chosen is because most of the infrastructure requirements (power, propane, land ownership etc.) were already there. The GTVFD has a radio tower on site that extends to 78' when needed. That will come down as the new tower takes its place. Currently the tower is fully extended so residents and those concerned can actually see its visual impact. It's virtually impossible to see the tower in the tree line from Seagull Lake.

Traveling up and down the Gunflint Trail you'll have to look hard to catch a momentary glimpse of the tower and certainly won't see it if you're not intently looking for it. The exception is looking down the 30' right of way under the power line leading to the fire hall. That's where you'll have a direct sight of the Fire Hall and the tower. Trying to identify the very top of the tower amongst the tree tops is a challenge. Even the properties next to the Fire Hall site are very minimally impacted if at all.

Bottom line, the SCENIC BYWAY is safe and protected. Communication shortcomings will be improved. The tower is not a visual issue. The best advice is to drive up the Trail and see it for yourself. **To learn more and discuss it with public safety representatives, we encourage everyone to attend a public information session Tuesday, April 10th at 6:00PM at Schaap Community Center, Hall 1. Check our website or the local Cook County News Herald for updates or changes.**

Sincerely,

Gunflint Trail Volunteer Fire Department