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National League of Cities Releases Small Cell Guide for Local Government.

The equipment is popping up in urban environments across the country, and the NLC is trying to educate local governments before 5G hits.

As small cell wireless equipment — those little cell service-spreading doohickeys attached to structures such as streetlights and utility poles — proliferates across the U.S., the National League of Cities (NLC) is looking to help local governments make decisions about how to allow it.

It's a move the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has already undertaken, as it drafts a model ordinance for cities to adopt or build upon. The NLC saw some shortcomings in that effort, and decided to publish its own.

"One important thing to keep in mind is that no national model is ever going to solve everybody's problems, and that was one of the issues with the [FCC] model from the outset," said Angelina Panettieri, a principal associate of technology and communications for NLC.

Toward that end, the ordinance leaves a lot of room for local governments to make considerations about what they want to do — for example, holding public hearings for every small cell installation or gathering input on the general concept and then setting up an administrative review process to cut down on the amount of time it takes to approve each project.

That was the approach that Raleigh, N.C., took.

"They actually engaged citizens through a more formal process … they really gave residents the opportunity to weigh in on the look and feel and design of this new equipment," said Nicole DuPuis, a principal associate of urban innovation for NLC.

The organization also released a guide explaining the fundamentals of small cell technology and what it's there for.

"Our focus has actually been on the guide for most of the last year and change," Panettieri said. "We thought it was important that a nontechnical resource be available to local officials just to understand what small cell technology is and why it's important to their communities so they aren't completely caught off guard when [companies] come to them and want to build."

Small cells, which have a short range and are most often deployed in denser urban environments to serve high demand, are a part of the connectivity backbone cities are building out in anticipation of smart city-type technology like pedestrian-counting sensors, but telecommunications firms are looking at them in another way: preparation for 5G wireless.

"5G is going to use a higher portion of the spectrum that, because of the wavelength, is not going to be able to transmit very far," she said.

The equipment does face local opposition in a lot of places. One sticking point is design — especially in places with older architecture, modern equipment can look out of place. A 2018 study by RVA Research, sponsored by the pro-broadband nonprofit Next Century Cities, found that the appearance of the equipment was the most common complaint about small cells.

The NLC guide includes a brief case study of how Boston worked with companies and community members to come to an agreement on how to help the equipment blend in more naturally with the cityscape.

Another is local concern about radio frequency radiation and whether it might increase cancer rates — though there doesn't appear to be much evidence that it does, scientists are still researching to more definitively answer questions. Furthermore, the FCC hasn't updated its guidelines on safe levels of radio frequency radiation exposure since 1996.

"It's reasonable for people to want to know that something close to street level is safe," Panettieri said.

A lot of local governments might not have to worry much about small cell installations, since Panettieri said telecommunications companies have mostly targeted middle-sized and larger cities for the equipment.

Nonetheless, the number of deployments is likely to rise, with telecommunications firms planning to look more to small cells as they compete with each other to set up 5G networks.

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