



Posted on Mon, Jun. 21, 2004

SEPTA's new call boxes still don't work

Four years late, and a year after promised start date, emergency system is broken

By **JIM NOLAN**
nolanj@phillynews.com

IN MAY 2003, SEPTA officials promised that their high-tech, \$3.9 million passenger-emergency system - designed to replace aging and unreliable subway call boxes - would be up and running by the end of the summer.

They weren't specific about the year.

Now it's more than a year after the promise, four years after the new system was supposed to be working, and nine years after the contract was awarded. And the emergency-call-box system still doesn't work.

"We're still using the old system," acknowledged James Jordan, SEPTA's security chief. "We're keeping that system maintained and tested.

"It has not been a very satisfying project," he added.

Situated on subway and trolley platforms on the Broad Street and Market-Frankford elevated lines, emergency-call boxes are supposed to be a direct link between passengers in distress and SEPTA police.

But 25 years of service, abuse and neglect have taken their toll on the old system - the bright yellow boxes, which feature a button and the instruction, "Push Once For Help."

In May 2003, a Daily News probe of the system found an alarming rate of call-box failures, many occurring at stations in high-crime areas of the city.

A subsequent SEPTA review of the system uncovered even more malfunctioning boxes - 31 of 108 on the system.

SEPTA officials repaired most of the old boxes within 10 days of learning of the problem.

Sources familiar with the system say it still has problems.

"It's still the old system, and the old system still has multiple communications failures and breakdowns," said a source who has tested the call boxes.

At the time last year, officials said that the new computerized system, which could maintain itself and provide more detailed information on the location of an emergency call, would be ready to take over the job within a couple of months. All that remained was fixing a software glitch.

That has not happened. Instead, the new call boxes remain covered in brown fabric and decorated in spray paint, little more than shoebox-sized canvases for graffiti artists or a place to rest an empty coffee cup.

The call-box controversy unfolds at a time when the cash-strapped agency is seeking support in Harrisburg for a bill that would increase the amount of its state subsidy by upping the percentage of the sales tax dedicated to mass transit.

SEPTA is projecting a \$70 million deficit in its upcoming fiscal year 2005 budget.

The call-box troubles also come at a time when America has been told to prepare for another terror attack this summer. SEPTA recently received more than \$1 million in federal anti-terror funds.

Jordan said the problem with the new call-box system stems from computer software that is supposed to test periodically the function of the system.

He said the software is telling the system that boxes are not working, when, in fact, they are operational.

"We continue to get false negatives," said Jordan. "We don't want to not be able to know if the box is working."

News of yet another delay with getting the new system on line distressed public officials and transit advocates.

"It seems that with all the anxiety of potential terrorist attacks this year, they better get it functioning pretty soon," said state Rep. Alan Butkovitz, D-Phila.

"It is a substantial investment. And with the health and safety of the public, they better take emergency recourse. There is no alternative to getting it done."

SEPTA is withholding its final payment of \$800,000 on the system until the problem is resolved with the contractor, based in Sewell, N.J. Asked to assess responsibility for the delay, Jordan said: "We're not clear that the fault can be simply apportioned."

He did say that officials have discussed a way of working around the testing glitch.

In fact, the project has been so long in getting completed that technology has improved and could provide an upgrade that would allow the system to operate.

SEPTA's best estimate of the cost of the upgrade is that it would be less than \$500,000. Meanwhile, the agency has been forced to hire a consultant to assess the system and whether such an upgrade could be made. SEPTA said it would use the withheld money to pay for the consultants and the upgrade if necessary.

Not everyone familiar with the issue considers the transit agency an innocent victim in the call-box boondoggle.

"Here we see another example of SEPTA needing more than just additional funding from the state," said Don Nigro, president of the Delaware Valley Association of Rail Passengers, a mass- transit watchdog group.

"SEPTA is in desperate need of effective management."

For the moment, SEPTA will continue to rely on its old system, installed in 1979. Officials acknowledged that the older the system gets, the more SEPTA must spend on maintenance and repairs.

Jordan said it should take only a few weeks to diagnose the problem. He stressed that he wasn't making any promises, except to say:

"Nobody has any interest in prolonging it any further."