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Little-used Boston pay phone kiosks could become Wi-Fi hot spots

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 02, 2012

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Public pay phones are a rarity around Boston these days, lonely sentinels from a time before cellphones revolutionized — for better or worse — the way people stay connected.

Now, city officials want to explore an idea that could once again make the kiosks a destination for residents and visitors: transforming them into beacons of free, wireless Internet connections.

“Otherwise, they’re just ugly street furniture,” Councilor at Large Felix G. Arroyo said by phone Wednesday, shortly after he and his council colleague Ayanna Pressley introduced an order to hold a hearing on the plan.

“We still live with a technology divide and in a world and in a city where not everyone has Internet access,” Arroyo added. “It’s more than just looking at Facebook. It’s how people look for work, how they apply for

jobs, and get their homework done.”

Details of how the effort in Boston might work have not been ironed out, but the two city councilors hope it would largely mimic a pilot program New York City launched three weeks ago.

There, free public Wi-Fi is broadcast by routers installed at pay phones, according to Nicholas Sbordone, a spokesman for New York’s information, technology, and telecommunications department. The signal is accessible within 100 to 200 feet of the kiosk.

Users can connect to the service whenever they want and for as long as they want — no password is needed and no personal information gathered.

The program operates at no cost to taxpayers, Sbordone said. Instead, the various private companies that own the kiosks pay for installing and maintaining the new infrastructure at the pay phone stations — some of which feature advertisements that generate revenue for the companies.

The service is offered at 10 New York pay phones so far, but officials hope to expand the Wi-Fi service.

In Boston, the City Council order calls for a hearing so that city officials and the community can discuss the feasibility of the proposal, Arroyo said.

The order was referred to the council’s city and neighborhood services committee. A date has not yet been set for the hearing.


Some of the remaining pay phones no longer work. At other kiosks, phones have been removed.

Since 1997, the number of pay phones nationwide has dropped from an estimated peak of about 2.2 million to about 400,000, according to the American Public Communications Council, which advocates for pay phone use. It was not immediately clear how many remain sprinkled across Boston.



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