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Boston exploring ways to add modern features to old-fashioned fire-alarm boxes

Posted by Matt Rocheleau January 24, 2013 04:07 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com / File)

In Aug. 2012, a neighbor pulled this fire alarm box to alert authorities about a fire at 808 Parker St. in Mission Hill. In the background is the burned, partially-boarded apartment building.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

The Boston Fire Department is exploring ways to utilize modern technology to add innovative features to its network of 2,200, old-fashioned fire alarm boxes.

“Boston is seeking to get the best value out of our current fire box infrastructure; we are looking for the boldest ideas about how to leverage the existing physical infrastructure to improve emergency and non-emergency communications with the public,” said a request for information the department recently released.

That written request proposes several suggestions, including adding: digital kiosks to provide information about the city; wireless hotspot or phone charging capabilities; displays to show urgent or location-based public messages; or sensors that monitor air quality noise pollution, traffic or light levels.

“We’re strictly looking for information at this point.” said Steve MacDonald, a

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spokesman for Boston Fire. "We want to see if there's anyone around who has ideas to use them for other things."

The city began soliciting ideas in late December from qualified vendors who agree to pay for all costs associated with submitting their suggestions. The city will continue to accept ideas through Feb. 22 and officials hope to prototype a new fire alarm box by the end of 2013.

MacDonald said the department has no intention of changing the look of the boxes or getting rid of them or the antiquated, underground telegraph-based technology they use.

The first fire alarm boxes were designed by Boston natives Dr. William Channing and Moses Farmer in the early 1850s. They became a common sight on street corners here and in many other cities by the 1880s.

By the 1970s, most US cities had abandoned the telegraph technology, replacing it with more modern communication systems. Some communities have removed the boxes altogether.

But, Boston has kept its old fire boxes in working condition, spending nearly \$2 million annually to do so.

The key reasoning is not about historic preservation, but rather that the simplistic system is virtually fool-proof and will still work regardless of other factors that could render more modern technology useless.

It does not require electricity to work. Unlike cell phone towers, the system is not prone to become overloaded. And, there are no language barriers to worry about.

When pulled, an alarm box will immediately alert staff at an emergency response center to send help to that location.

"If the electricity goes out and the cell towers go out and if you don't speak English, it doesn't matter," MacDonald said during a phone interview in August. "If you pull this, we'll come."

"They're not pulled or activated all that often," he added then. But, "It's a redundancy and an added safety measure."

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MacDonald gave that interview hours after an early-morning fire in a three-story apartment building in Mission Hill left two people injured.

Firefighters were able to quickly get medical aid to the two injured people and extinguished the two-alarm blaze before it spread further.

They were alerted to the scene by a neighbor who, instead of calling with a landline or cell phone, took the unusual step of pulling an outdoor fire alarm box.

“He told me he knew it would go through,” MacDonald said at the time.

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To read more about the history of Boston’s fire alarm boxes, [click here](#).

To read more about the city’s request for ideas to add modern features to Boston’s existing fire alarm boxes, [click here](#).

City officials also recently proposed modernizing public pay phones around Boston by adding free, wireless Internet access to them. To read more about that idea, [click here](#).

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