

Phone boxes called a 'hazard'

Many say blind, others are endangered

By Dana Bartholomew, Staff Writer

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Blind residents like Racquel Decipeda say the new Verizon FiOS boxes that have been placed on power poles around the Valley are causing a hazard for the visually impaired. This box is at the corner of Zelzah Avenue and Devonshire Street in Granada Hills. (David Crane/Staff Photographer)

DAILY NEWS PODCAST

Ken Jeffries talks with protesters in favor of a public option in the health-care legislation before Congress during a demonstration organized via MoveOn.org outside the Anthem/Blue Cross complex in Woodland Hills. Also the City Council allows **only one rooster per household**, and blind residents protest **bulky Verizon equipment boxes** they say



are mounted too low on utility poles.

GRANADA HILLS — For the blind, there are enough hazards when walking down the sidewalk — loose dogs, low branches and couches littering the curb.

Now there's a bigger obstacle to bop pedestrians -- visually impaired or otherwise -- in the nose: metal phone boxes.

"If I'm walking by myself, I'll hit it dead center," said Racquel Decipeda, secretary of the San Fernando Valley Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind, standing next to an eye-level protuberance from a phone pole in Granada Hills.

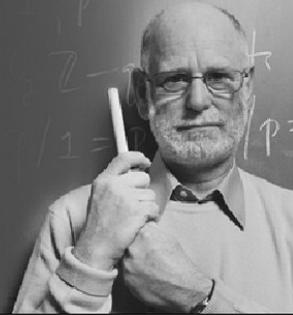
"It's a hazard for the blind community. Just move it up, that's all we ask, before someone gets hurt."

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A growing number of city officials, neighborhood groups and advocates for the disabled are objecting to the hundreds of high-tech phone-equipment boxes popping onto public rights of way.

A meeting is scheduled today between opponents of the boxes and Verizon officials, who maintain their equipment is safe. On Friday, the city Public Works Commission will vote on whether to ban the street-level telephone boxes.

The large metal cabinets can jut two feet across city sidewalks from knee-level to the top of one's head. In addition to being a hazard to pedestrians, some say they serve as blackboards for graffiti taggers.

They also can prevent motorists pulling out of their driveways from seeing oncoming cars.

"They're ugly," said Jerry Askew, a board member of the Granada Hills South Neighborhood Council, the first of many to oppose the boxes. "They're blight. They're a hazard.

"If a kid is riding down the street on a bike, they can smack right into one."

Since last fall, Verizon has mounted 267 of its low-lying metal cabinets on utility poles citywide to speed voice, video and other communications.

The company plans to add another 500 of its so-called FiOS boxes and is seeking permission to operate the sidewalk fiber optic distribution hubs.

The city contends the phone company broke local laws by installing boxes that block pedestrian rights of way, while others say the company violated state building codes and federal laws protecting the disabled.

The bureaus of Street Services and Engineering filed a joint report recommending Verizon be banned from operating its pole-mounted cabinets.

Verizon, according to the report, said it mounted them three feet off the ground for "worker convenience and lower cost."

It said Verizon contends its status as a telecommunications company allows it to place equipment in public rights of way, including sidewalks.

"We feel the boxes were properly placed, but are working with the city to reach a solution that is agreeable

Wednesday's Poll

**Do you think Verizon s phone box placement is dangerous for pedestrians? [See related story](#)
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to all parties," said Jon Davies, a Verizon spokesman for its western region. "They are completely safe."

Davies declined to discuss the FiOS boxes until after Wednesday's meeting with Cynthia Ruiz, chair of the Public Works Commission.

Former City Councilman Richard Alatorre, who stepped down after a corruption scandal, has been lobbying on Verizon's behalf.

City officials said Verizon promised last year to work toward a solution, then said it would "do absolutely nothing."

"Nix the boxes," said Councilman Greig Smith. "Verizon has not been genuine in dealing with us. ... After all this talk, it's like they punched me in the eyes, then thumbed their nose at the city."

The low-lying boxes are opposed by neighborhood councils in Granada Hills, North Hills and others across the city.

Askew reported one kid was seen slamming into a FiOS box on his skateboard.

Seniors who can't see well risk run-ins with the metal cabinets.

The Braille Institute, National Federation of the Blind and the California Council for the Blind have each asked that the phone boxes be raised overhead.

Donna Pomerantz, who is legally blind, said

blind walkers must feel for sidewalk obstructions. But because the 3-foot phone cabinets hover three feet off the concrete, it's impossible to detect them with canes.

"Because they stick out so far, a person who is visually impaired can run into them," said Pomerantz, president of the Council for the Blind's San Gabriel Valley chapter, who will attend Wednesday's meeting.

"Our canes wouldn't. But we could get hit in the shoulder, the stomach, any body part that chooses to get hit by the box monster."

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