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How Will Boston Modernize City Fire Alarms?



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January 15, 2013 By *Sarah Rich*

The city of Boston is interested in modernizing its fire alarm boxes, but how the city does that will be determined by which vendor submits the best idea.

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The city, in conjunction with the Boston Fire Department, released a [request for information](#) for ideas on how the city can upgrade its current fire alarm system using new technologies. Boston is only soliciting ideas from private vendors "who are able to physically modify and upgrade the current fire alarm boxes." Submissions are due Feb. 22.

Justin Brown, the Fire Department's deputy commissioner, said the city's existing 2,200 street-corner fire alarms operate on an electric telegraph system, connected through miles of low-voltage copper wire running in loops. When someone pulls the lever on a fire alarm, a telegraph signal is sent to both the Fire Department's communications center, known as the Fire Alarm Office, and the local fire house.

But Brown said that because fire alarms only create one-way communication, the city wants to explore new ways to possibly expand beyond a single message from fire alarm boxes to the Fire Department.

"We're interested in having multiple communication types and really enhancing the ability to send more specific messages so that we can use them for both emergency and non-emergency purposes, but also get more specific messages," Brown said. "Is this actually a fire? Is this a law enforcement call? Do you need medical assistance? And maybe be able to communicate back and forth."

According to Boston CIO Bill Oates, the RFI is intentionally not too descriptive so that the city can gather a whole range of ideas.

"Lots of people have ideas, but we really felt that before we started to hone in on anything in particular, we would go out and see what other ideas folks might have on this," Oates said.

One of the more pressing concerns for the Fire Department, according to Brown, is the amount of money spent maintaining the existing fire alarm system. Because the system is expensive to maintain, particularly when fire alarms need to be replaced, Brown said the Fire Department would like to get more value from its investment.

Another major reason for the upgrade is the frequency of false alarms with the current system. Every time an alarm is pulled, it must be manually reset. According to Brown, between January and September of last year, each of the city's three busiest alarm boxes were pulled 10 times. Every one of those instances was a false alarm. Throughout the year, the Fire Department deals with false alarms roughly 90 percent of the time.

The Fire Department hopes that modernized technology in the fire alarm boxes will reduce the number of false alarms.

"One of our goals is to reduce the false alarms, and one of our goals is to provide the community with a better way to contact us and a better service that meets their needs better than just pulling a box and waiting for several fire trucks to show up," Brown said.

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The City of Boston does not have 22,000 fire alarm boxes on the street it's approximately 2,200 and when the box is pulled it only goes to Fire Alarm it does not go to the fire houses. Fire Alarm then dispatches to appropriate Fire companies.

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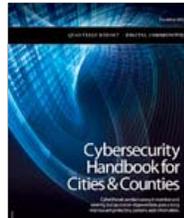
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