

Cell Phone Ban

by Laura Forlano
Friday, February 28, 2003 12:00 AM

There has been almost daily news coverage of a fatal [boating accident](#) that has exposed the failure of New York City's 911 tracking system . That is not the only news so far this year involving technology issues and government action, or inaction.

For a list of technology laws passed in 2003 so far, go to Gotham Gazette's [Searchlight Voting Records](#)

LEGISLATING COMMON SENSE

As we made clear in Gotham Gazette's issue of the week on [cell phones](#) , -- and as you made clear on the accompanying [message board](#)

-- many New Yorkers cringe at the ringing of cell phones. A [law](#)

, restricting the use of cell phones in places of public performance, was passed by the City Council on February 13. Mayor Bloomberg vetoed the bill on the premise that it would be impossible to enforce, but the City Council overrode the veto and turned the bill, which had been introduced by Council Member Philip Reed, into law.

This law, which is the first such law in the nation, imposes a \$50 fine for violations. Cell phone use is prohibited in theaters, libraries, museums, galleries, movie theaters and concert halls, except in the case of emergency. Whether or not this law is adequately publicized by venues and enforced, it is hoped that it will raise cell phone user awareness of the aggravation they cause.

LIFE SAVING CELL PHONES

As much as cell phones can be a public nuisance, they also have the potential to save lives. Unfortunately, this month, the lives of four teenage boys were lost. On January 24, one of the boys placed a frantic 12-second 911 call from a sinking boat off the coast of City Island in the Bronx. The call was mishandled by a 911 operator (whose supervisor is now facing disciplinary charges) and emergency crews were never dispatched.

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According to a January 29 New York Times article by Kevin Flynn, the boating accident has "underscored an intolerable delay in creating a tracking system to trace the location of emergency calls from cell phones in New York." Currently, emergency calls from cell phones can only be traced to the nearest cell tower, which could be miles away from the caller.

Since 1991, \$162 to \$200 million in surcharge fees intended for an advanced tracking system have been collected from cell phone users. Despite this, the city is [planning](#) to spend \$25 million on the 311 system that is for non-emergency calls. The 311 system is expected to reduce the burden on the currently flooded 911-system.

Mayor Bloomberg said that 911 operators and their supervisors need more training so that standard emergency procedures are followed. The 911 system also may need more staff to keep up with the growing log of emergency calls that has grown 30 percent in the past five years without a similar increase in the number of operators.

Days after the horrific event, New York police officials said that the city was still three years away from installing an advanced system that could track phone numbers and pinpoint their locations. But, the accident has prompted the police to speed up their efforts to install an advanced tracking system by the end of the year according to testimony before the City Council Public Safety Committee.

DIALING TOO MANY DIGITS

A new federal law went into effect on February 1 that requires New Yorkers to dial 1 plus the area code in order to make phone calls. However, many people reported dialing seven-digit calls as usual without problems. According to Verizon, this was due to "blind spots" in the telephone system that overlooked the missing numbers. But, these will be weeded out relatively quickly.

The law was prompted by a penchant of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for fostering competition among local telephone companies in cities with multiple area codes, no matter how inconvenient it seems to consumers. While the New York Public Service

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Commission protested the regulation, the FCC declined to waive the requirement.

EFFICIENCY

The City Council has also issued two reports on on-going initiatives to make government agencies more efficient. One of the reports [updates](#) an October 2002 report on e-procurement. The other is on the human services extranet project begun in 1997 (report forthcoming on the City Council Select Committee for Technology in Government Reports

[page](#)

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