

The Latest on 311, Pay Phone Rate Rollback, Camera Surveillance, Hi-tech

by Laura Forlano

Saturday, June 01, 2002 12:00 AM

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This year, the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications will receive a \$7.7 million budget increase, making it the only city agency to escape severe cuts, according to the New York Times. The money will be used in part to implement the 311 centralized call system which will enable one number to be used for all complaints and questions to city agencies.

The 311 system, which is expected to cost \$50 million, is supposed to make the city's call centers more efficient and increase the quality of services offered. For example, the new system will include a line with 150 languages. While other city agencies are suffering as a result of cuts, the increased spending on technology aims to benefit all agencies by leveraging resources and making them more autonomous. Bloomberg's close relationship with Commissioner Gino Menchini of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, and his career as the head of a high-tech company, drive his strong belief in the benefit of technology for New York City.

Pay Phone Rate Rollback

After increasing pay phone rates to 50 cents in March, Verizon is switching back 14,000 phones on sidewalks and in subway stations to 25 cents. While the 50 cent calls were unlimited in length, Verizon found that customers in New York rarely use pay phones for more than 2.5 minutes. Thus, the increased minutes were not an incentive to use the phones. However, pay phones in hotels and airports will remain at the higher rate. Verizon's decision stems from pressure by 80 other pay phone companies and the increasing use of cell phones.

Internet For The Elderly

This month the TenantSpin channel offered elderly community groups the opportunity to broadcast their own TV show for four days at the [New Museum of Contemporary Art](#). Elderly groups from the Lincoln Square Neighborhood and Henry Street Settlement discussed their ideas. Watch their shows at the [SuperChannel Archive](#).

Security Cameras

Last month, the New York Times reported that the National Park Service began using

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surveillance cameras with face recognition technology to photograph visitors entering the Statue of Liberty. The pictures are then compared to a database of terror suspects. The increased security was motivated by the warning of a potential attack on the national landmark. Security cameras are becoming more and more pervasive in New York as a result of the attacks of 9-11.

Privacy advocates such as the New York Civil Liberties Union strongly oppose the use of surveillance cameras because they fear it will lead to a lack of privacy. This month, the [New Museum of Contemporary Art](#) is featuring an exhibition called [Open Source Art Hack](#) which includes walking tours of surveillance cameras in Soho. Similarly, the [Electronic Privacy Information Center](#) conducted a postcard campaign in Washington, DC earlier this year using striking images to illustrate the increased using of surveillance cameras. For more information, see [Observing Surveillance](#).

New Diesel Generators In Chelsea

Con Edison reportedly plans to install eight diesel generators in Chelsea in order to prevent potential power failures this summer. The 40-foot long units will provide enough additional power to plug-in 400 homes for an entire year. But, the neighborhood block association and community board are concerned about noise problems, particle emissions and electrical hazards. High increases in energy consumption in Chelsea are cited as the reasons for the additional generators.

Hi-Tech Maps And Community Boards

Last month, I introduced hi-tech maps and their importance in the clean-up and recovery efforts following 9-11. But they have everyday implications as well, for community boards.

In the past eight years, hi-tech maps, or graphical information systems, have become increasingly important in understanding and communicating information about cities. These maps can link information about health epidemics such as the West Nile virus, crime outbreaks, rat problems or traffic congestion to the basemap of New York City. This map, developed by the [Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications](#) (DoITT), commonly called NYCmap (pronounced: nice map), is the Velcro to which up to 500 layers of information, stored in databases, can be attached.

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For examples of how these layers can be linked with maps, see the images produced the Community Mapping Assistance Project (CMAP) at the [Gotham Gazette Map Archive](#) .

"Graphical Information Systems enables the data to dance," says Al Leidner of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications. These maps can give answers to complicated questions involved in land use, economic development and public health planning.

Currently, community boards must wrestle with a pile of different paper maps in order to make decisions that affect their neighborhoods. With hi-tech maps, the answer to a question about the number of elementary schools within walking distance to public transportation routes but not near liquor stores could be retrieved almost instantly.

"Limited access to information communication technology has kept [community] boards from fulfilling the role envisioned by the City Charter," Tom Lowenhaupt of Queens Community Board 3 said at the [Municipal Art Society](#) on June 13. One organization that is providing free technology training to community groups is the [Citizens Committee for New York City](#)

Community board budgets are usually only around \$200,000 and their board members are volunteers, so funds for high-end map software applications are clearly unavailable. However, less expensive software such as Microsoft's MapPoint, which costs about \$200, can be used to get some of the same functionality.

Still, while the programs have become easier to use in recent years, they require training. To this end, the Municipal Art Society is starting a graphical information systems (GIS) training session for community leaders.

Due to security risks, NYCmap cannot be provided to the general public. However, some examples of hi-tech maps that are available to the public include NYPIRG's [OASIS](#) map of open spaces and DoITT's soon-to-go-public MyNeighborhood map, which will include eight layers of information about individual communities.

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