Phone boxes called a 'hazard'

Many say blind, others are endangered

By Dana Bartholomew, Staff Writer

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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
Past poll results
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."