



November 2, 2020

To: Regional Planning and Highways Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer

Subject: Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies Call Box Upgrade and Reduction Plan

Overview

The Orange County Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies assists motorists and mitigates traffic congestion through its Freeway Call Box, 511 Motorist Assistance and Traveler Information, and Freeway Service Patrol programs. Staff is requesting Board of Directors' approval to reduce the number of freeway call boxes while performing a required equipment upgrade.

Recommendation

Authorize staff to reduce the number of freeway call boxes operated by the Orange County Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies as part of a required call box radio upgrade.

Background

In 1988, as a result of legislation that is now a part of California Streets and Highways Code Chapter 14, Sections 2550 to 2559, the Orange County Transportation Commission was designated as Orange County's Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE). In 1991, the Orange County SAFE, along with several other entities, became part of the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA). In 1992, the Orange County SAFE was expanded to include the Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) program. In 2009, the SAFE was expanded to include regional participation in the Southern California 511 Motorist Assistance and Traveler Information (511) Program.

The Orange County SAFE operates a system of call boxes located on Orange County freeways, toll roads, and select state highways. Funding for operating the call boxes comes from a \$1 registration fee on vehicles registered in Orange County. This revenue stream generated \$2.9M in fiscal year (FY) 2019-20.—Approximately \$1.1M of the \$2.9M was spent on the

call box program for call box maintenance, call center services, and cellular phone services in FY 2019-20. Remaining funds from the registration fee are used for OCTA's participating cost in the regional 511 Program and provides a portion of the required local match funding for the FSP program.

During its peak, the call box program maintained approximately 1,200 call boxes and received an average of 135 calls a day. In 2006, the call box program received only an average of 15 calls a day. Due to the significant drop in the number of calls and significantly diminished demand, the OCTA Board of Directors (Board) authorized staff to reduce the number of freeway call boxes to approximately 621. In 2015, the call box program received an average of five calls a day, and the Board authorized staff to further reduce the number of freeway call boxes to approximately 359.

Discussion

With FSP tow trucks proactively assisting motorists with disabled vehicles on Orange County freeways, increased availability of cellular telephones, and the implementation of a mobile call box functionality within the 511 Program, reliance on the call box program has continued to decrease significantly, with calls for assistance now averaging just over two calls a day. Attachment A shows the decline in call box calls beginning FY 2009-10, along with the number of 511 Program motorist aid calls received annually since its inception in July 2012.

Orange County freeway call boxes currently utilize AT&T's 3G cellular network to communicate with the contracted call box call answering center. AT&T notified California call box programs that the 3G cellular communications network will be discontinued by December 31, 2021, with reduced availability in some areas before that as AT&T begins to migrate equipment to a new 4G infrastructure. Customers utilizing AT&T's 3G cellular network must migrate to 4G communications solutions before December 31, 2021, in order to maintain service. As part of planning for a 4G radio upgrade, staff evaluated the usage and spacing of freeway call boxes and identified call boxes that may be eliminated from the program before upgrading call box radios to new 4G communication solution.

Since the last required radio upgrade in 2015, staff removed several call boxes at the request of California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) engineers, evaluated call boxes that were removed for extended periods as part of freeway construction projects, and identified call boxes that no longer had a matched pair call box on the opposite side of the freeway. Staff also examined call box usage history for all freeway call boxes, examined the availability of nearby off highway assistance, reviewed cellular service coverage maps for area

cellular service providers, considered off-peak highway traffic volumes (the availability of passing motorists), and the availability of FSP services during peak traffic hours. Through this process, staff has identified 67 freeway call boxes for permanent removal.

All area cellular service providers report full-strength coverage along freeways and state highways within Orange County, but due to the more remote nature of some highway segments, staff recommends no reductions on State Routes 74, 133, and 142.

Staff recommends an approximate 50 percent reduction in freeway call boxes on State Route 241 and on Santiago Canyon Road where call boxes are spaced at one-half mile intervals. A full list of the number of recommended removals and number of remaining call boxes by highway is included as Attachment B.

Based on the availability of other services and continuing declines in the use of freeway call boxes, staff believes that the proposed reduction in freeway call boxes is appropriate. Staff recommends that future reductions be considered when communications upgrades are required or when determined to be appropriate based on changing conditions. Until that time, staff recommends limiting permanent removals to freeway call boxes identified as potential safety concerns by California Department of Transportation engineers, or upon assessment following a construction project, along with the matching pair call box, if applicable.

Fiscal Impact

The project was approved in OCTA's Fiscal Year 2020-21 Budget, Motorist Services Department SAFE Fund, Account No.0013-7612-S1001-ASM.

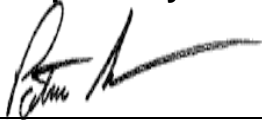
Summary

Board approval is requested to reduce Orange County freeway call boxes as recommended by staff.

Attachments

- A. Annual Call Box and 511 Call Volumes, Beginning Fiscal Year 2009-10
- B. Number of Call Boxes Recommended for Removal by Highway

Prepared by:

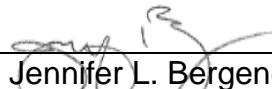


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