



April 6, 2026

To: Regional Transportation Planning Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Darrell Johnson", is placed over the "From:" line of the memo.

Subject: Service Authority for Freeways and Expressways Call Box Program

Overview

The Orange County Service Authority for Freeway and Expressways assists motorists whose vehicles have become disabled and mitigates traffic congestion through its Freeway Service Patrol, 511 Motorist Assistance and Traveler Information, and Freeway Call Box Program. With the broad adoption of cellular telephones and the availability of safer options, including 511 motorist assistance, call box usage has dropped to less than one service call per day. Given significant usage declines, increased maintenance costs, and the availability of safer options, staff recommends the Orange County Transportation Authority focus its efforts on 511 Motorist Assistance as the next generation assistance solution and discontinue the Call Box Program by the end of fiscal year 2026-27.

Recommendation

Authorize staff to focus efforts on 511 Motorist Assistance and to discontinue the Call Box Program by June 30, 2027.

Background

In 1985, the California Legislature passed SB 1199, adding new sections to the California Streets and Highways Code (SHC). This created the legal foundation for Service Authorities for Freeway Expressways (SAFE) and allowed counties to generate revenue for motorist aid systems. In 1988, the Orange County Transportation Commission was designated as Orange County's SAFE. Once created, Orange County SAFE implemented a call box system on Orange County freeways, toll roads, and select state highways. While designed to relieve an overburdened 911 system, the call box program is not intended to be used as an emergency system.

Funding for SAFE programs comes from a \$1 registration fee on vehicles registered in Orange County. Section 2557(d) of the SHC states that any monies received and allocated by a service authority may be used for implementation and ongoing costs to maintain and operate motorist aid systems, including, but not limited to, call boxes, call box lighting, operation of a freeway service patrol program, and 511 Motorist Assistance and Traveler Information systems (511). Service authority funding is intended to supplement, and not replace, expenditures for similar infrastructure and services on the California Freeway and Expressway System. Orange County SAFE funding averages \$2.9 million a year, supporting the 511, Freeway Service Patrol (FSP), and Call Box Programs. Attachment A shows the legislative history of SAFE programs. Attachment B shows SAFE funding history for the last ten years.

In 1991, Orange County SAFE, along with several other entities, became part of the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA). In 1992, Orange County SAFE expanded its motorist services program to include FSP. FSP operates a fleet of contracted tow trucks that proactively patrol Orange County freeways during peak traffic hours to provide limited aid to motorists with disabled vehicles and to remove debris that causes congestion from freeway lanes. FSP was later expanded to include service from 5:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, and limited weekend service.

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) requested a unified three-digit number for traveler information. On July 21, 2000, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) officially designated dialing the numbers 5-1-1 as the nationwide three-digit telephone number for Motorist Assistance and Traveler Information Services (MATIS) in the United States. This designation made 5-1-1 the standard number motorists could dial for current travel and traffic information across the country. While the FCC assigned the number in 2000, individual states deployed 511 MATIS at different times.

In 2009, Orange County SAFE expanded to include participation in the regional MATIS 511 system, Go511, which allows travelers to access traffic, transit, and rideshare information by visiting the Go511 website or mobile application or by calling 5-1-1. In 2012, Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura counties added motorist aid functionality to their 511 programs, allowing motorists to coordinate freeway assistance by calling 5-1-1 and selecting "motorist aid." The system was later rebranded as SoCal 511, and Riverside and San Bernardino counties joined the program.

During its peak, the Orange County 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 an average of 15 calls a day. Based on diminished

demand, the OCTA Board of Directors (Board) authorized staff to reduce the number of freeway call boxes by about 50 percent.

In 2015, the Call Box Program received an average of five calls a day. The Board authorized further reductions of freeway call boxes to approximately 350. With the implementation of motorist services functionality within the 511 system, the Orange County Call Box Program continued to experience significant reductions in use.

In 2020, following the transition to a more technologically advanced call center, staff was able to distinguish service requests from maintenance, testing, and other non-service calls. The Call Box Program averaged fewer than two service requests a day, and the Board authorized additional reductions to freeway call boxes. Today the Call Box Program receives less than one service request a day. Ninety-eight percent of calls were coded as a disabled vehicle, collision, or debris. Two percent (four calls) were coded as fire or medical. Attachment C shows annual call box and 511 motorist aid service calls for the last ten years.

Discussion

California's SAFE Call Box programs were established to create a statewide roadside motorist aid communication system to assist stranded or distressed motorists, such as those experiencing breakdowns, accidents, or encountering roadway hazards on freeways and highways. The program was designed as a locally-funded service provided at no cost to motorists. At a time when cellular service was limited and not widely accessible, call boxes played a critical role in improving motorist and roadway safety by reducing the amount of time drivers spent stranded on or near active travel lanes while awaiting assistance.

Today, cellular networks enable wireless communication via email, text, instant messaging, and voice calls, with service coverage extended via satellite technology in areas where traditional infrastructure is difficult to deploy. The widespread availability and adoption of cellular services, combined with the federal designation of 5-1-1 as the nationwide number for motorist assistance and traveler information, has positioned 511 as the next-generation replacement for roadside call boxes.

Over the past decade, larger jurisdictions have significantly reduced their roadside call box programs. In 2015, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) was among the first agencies to remove most of its call boxes. MTC transferred responsibility for call boxes located in tunnels and tubes to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and has gradually removed call boxes from bridges, an effort that often requires lane or bridge

closures and, in some cases, bridge rail modifications supported by engineering plans. MTC currently plans to continue maintaining approximately 50 wireline call boxes in locations where cellular service is not yet available.

Similarly, in 2015, the Los Angeles SAFE presented a four-phase plan to reduce call boxes from approximately 1,800 to 600 between 2015 and 2019, after having already reduced call boxes from 4,500 to 2,000 in 2007. LA SAFE is currently developing a plan to remove its remaining call boxes.

In 2018, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) right-sized its system from approximately 1,200 to 379 call boxes. The remaining call boxes were located primarily along rural state highways where cellular coverage was weak. SANDAG emphasized 511 motorist assistance as the urban alternative to call boxes and concluded that continued maintenance of underutilized call boxes was no longer efficient given declining usage, widespread cellular telephone (cell phone) ownership, and the availability of 511 services and freeway service patrols.

Faced with declining usage, significant cost increases, and the availability of safer alternatives, SAFE agencies statewide have been evaluating the future of their call box programs. In 2025, jurisdictions including Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties expedited the removal of their call boxes and discontinued their call box programs.

Since the last formal system reduction in 2020, OCTA staff has removed a substantial number of call boxes in connection with multi-year construction projects and, at the request of Caltrans engineers, due to safety concerns. Following project completion, many of these temporary removals were converted to permanent removals because freeway widening and realignment projects reduced or eliminated roadway setbacks and narrowed shoulders, leaving few locations where motorists could safely stop to use a call box. Attachment D illustrates the removal of call boxes over the past ten years.

California's call box networks rely on older, proprietary technology that requires frequent maintenance and includes components that are increasingly difficult to source. The current call boxes are the only solar-cellular units that have been crash-tested and approved for installation on California highways. As a result, maintenance services are effectively limited to a single vendor, creating a de facto monopoly. Although the OCTA callbox maintenance agreement does not expire until June 30, 2027, peer agencies have reported significant cost increases when renegotiating their maintenance services with the single-source vendor.

The physical infrastructure and maintenance requirements make the program significantly more costly than motorist assistance options that do not rely on fixed roadside infrastructure. In FY 2024–25, each call box service call costed OCTA approximately \$1,337, excluding overhead. By comparison, each 511 motorist aid service call costs approximately \$7.11, also excluding overhead.

All major cellular service providers report full-strength coverage along Orange County freeways and state highways, eliminating the original need for a fixed-roadside communication system. The Pew Research Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, and nonadvocacy research group, reports that as of 2024, 98 percent of Americans owned a cell phone, and that this figure is consistent across all ages, genders, ethnicities, incomes, and community groups. With programs like California LIFELINE, qualified households may receive free or discounted services, making cell phones available regardless of income. Attachment E shows the growth in cell phone ownership for the last ten years.

This makes 511 an effective option for freeway assistance. In emergencies, motorists are encouraged to call 911, which connects them directly to the California Highway Patrol. As an emergency number, 911 is available to motorists anywhere there is a cellular signal, regardless of the service provider, even if the phone is not activated. This has been a requirement since 1999, when the FCC sought to apply modern communication technologies to public safety.

With FSP tow trucks actively patrolling Orange County freeways during peak travel periods, widespread cell phone ownership, increasingly reliable cellular networks, and the convenience of public and private sector applications that do not require motorists to exit the relative safety of their vehicles, the call box program no longer provides the level of effectiveness or value it once did.

Summary

Given declining reliance on call boxes, rising maintenance and operating costs, and the availability of safer alternatives that do not require motorists to walk along active freeways to seek assistance, 511 represents the next-generation evolution of motorist aid services. Concentrating motorist assistance efforts on 511 is also fully aligned with DOT goals to establish a nationwide motorist assistance and traveler information system.

Transitioning from freeway call boxes in favor of services that are demonstrably safer for motorists and significantly more cost-effective to operate reflects responsible stewardship of public resources and is consistent with OCTA's obligation to act in the best interest of the public's trust. SAFE funds currently dedicated to the call box program will be reallocated to continued 511

development, support, outreach, and FSP support. Based on these considerations, staff recommends the planned, orderly decommissioning of the remaining freeway call boxes, and the transition of SAFE-funded motorist assistance services to 511, as the next generation replacement by June 30, 2027.

Attachments

- A. Service Authority for Freeway and Expressways (SAFE) Legislative History
- B. SAFE Funding History
- C. Call Box and 511 Motorist Assistance Call Volumes
- D. Call Box Removals by Fiscal Year
- E. Pew Research Cell Phone Ownership Statistics

Prepared by:



Patrick Sampson
Section Manager, Senior
Motorist Services
(714) 560-5425

Approved by:



Kirk Avila
General Manager,
Express Lanes Programs
(714) 560-5674