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Underground cell service to reach T's Green, Blue lines by year's end

Posted by Matt Rocheleau October 5, 2011 09:12 AM

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Next week, the T will post the above sign inside subway cars and buses as a reminder to riders to use mobile phones courteously.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Cell phone service is expected to be available in underground areas of the MBTA's Blue Line and nearly all of the Green Line by the end of the year and will extend to all below-ground areas of the nation's oldest subway system by the end of 2012, officials said.

Across subterranean portions of Boston's subway system, service availability for mobile users depends on whether their carrier has reached an agreement to join the shared infrastructure being installed by InSite Wireless, LLC, which charges carriers to connect and gives a cut of that revenue to the T, Joe Mullin, the communication's company's vice president of engineering and operations, said today.

Underground reception is already available on the entire Orange Line and parts of the Red Line for AT&T and T-Mobile users, he said. Those two carriers and Verizon also offer service within four downtown stations -- Government Center, Park Street, Downtown Crossing and State Street -- as well as their connecting tunnels.

Other major carriers, including Sprint and MetroPCS have discussed, but not signed contracts, to offer subway cell service. None of the carriers could immediately be reached for comment today.

Infrastructure along the Blue Line and the Green Line, with the exception of Prudential and Symphony stations, is expected to be installed later this year, Mullin said confirming [a report this morning](#) by Boston University's independent newspaper, The Daily Free Press.

Once that work is complete, carriers are expected to negotiate any unsigned contracts and then connect their networks to the system, which may lead to staggered roll-out across carriers, he said.

By the end of 2012, service is expected to reach the remaining untapped areas along the Red Line between Kendall and Alewife stations and between Shawmut and Ashmont stations as well as inside the Prudential and Symphony stations on the Green Line's E branch, the communications company's executive said.

The completion of those projects will allow riders to text, make phone calls, check e-mail, and surf the web while traveling through all of the MBTA's 35 underground stations and its 19 miles of tunnels.

When that happens, Mullin said the Hub's subway system among will the nation's first to offer below ground reception throughout. In all, he said 98 remote amplifiers, 422 antennas and 71,455 feet of radiating cable will be installed to complete the distributed antenna system – a particularly impressive feat given the constraints of Boston's old transit system.

“The challenge in Boston is that there's only two tracks,” which, unlike some other subway systems in the country, prevents any work from being done while trains are in operation, he said. “You only get to go on the tracks between 1 and 5 a.m.”

Getting the equipment and workers into the tunnels and leaving enough to clear the area in time for the morning commute often only allows crews to get about two to three hours of work in each night, he added.

Starting next week as part of an occasionally-refreshed campaign and timed to prepare for two more subway lines to soon offer expanded cell service coverage, the transit authority will post signs in subway cars and aboard buses to promote courteous cell phone use, MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo said in an e-mail.

And, before the year's end, he said Transit Police will launch another outreach effort offering tips and advice to riders for protecting their cell phones from potential theft.

T customers first received below-ground service in late 2007 when a network along four downtown stations and the tunnels between them launched, according to Mullin. In spring 2010, all underground portions of the Orange Line received service as did the Red Line from South Station through Andrew Station.

Through a 15-year contract the MBTA signed with InSite Wireless in 2005, officials said the communications company covers the entire four-phase undertaking's cost, which Mullin declined to disclose.

Additionally, the T will receive approximately \$5.2-million for the downtown, Orange and Red Line areas that already offer cell service, the transit authority spokesman said. That figure will rise as more carriers sign on and as cell service expands elsewhere through subway system, he said.

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