

www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-new-area-codenov30,0,1429175.story

chicagotribune.com

New area code rings up unexpected charges for some condo boards

Security entrances may need upgrade to cope with '872'

By Kristen Mack

Tribune reporter

November 30, 2009

Front gate buzzers at condos and apartments throughout the region went on the fritz when the 872 area code went into effect this month.

The change requires 11-digit dialing -- 1, plus the area code and the seven-digit number -- for all calls, local or long distance, and caused preprogrammed call boxes in the Chicago area to go kaput. It also left repairmen, package-delivery guys and visitors stuck in the cold wondering why their calls weren't being picked up. There are a variety of fixes for the problem, but in at least one case, a complex had to install a nearly \$2,000 system to address the default.



Beyond the annoyance of reprogramming our fingers to dial all 11 digits, the call-box failures are another unintended consequence of the new area code.

"This is one of those changes that affect people in ways you can't anticipate," said Jim Chilsen, a spokesman for the Citizens Utility Board, a statewide utility watchdog.

The new Chicago area code was added because phone companies say there is a number shortage because of the explosion of cell phones and fax numbers.

The Illinois Commerce Commission warned Chicagoans there may be issues when the new area code went into effect Nov. 7. Commissioner Norma Reyes said residents and businesses should prepare by reprogramming equipment with automatic dialing features to "avoid any interruptions in communication."

Chris Layton, the condo association treasurer at a 13-unit Lakeview building, said he could have heard that notice and "still not think of my front buzzer."

It wasn't until his friends dialed his number from the call box and couldn't reach him that it "dawned on me why it wasn't going through," he said.

"In days before cell phones, you didn't have a multiple area codes. If you lived in this building, you had one choice," he said of the call box, which allowed only seven-digit numbers to be programmed. Although the fix was "fairly painless," the \$1,700 hit to the association's dues was unexpected, he said.

New area codes are created in two ways. In a "geographic split," part of an existing area code becomes a new area code, which was the case in the 1990s when chunks of Chicago's 312 area code were used to create the 773, 630, 708 and 847 codes.

In an "overlay," such as the 872 area code, 11-digit dialing is necessary. There's no technical reason. It's a policy decision by the Federal Communications Commission to remove competitive barriers in the market.

The FCC doles out numbers to Illinois phone companies in blocks of 10,000. In an effort to conserve numbers, phone companies must assign at least 75 percent of their supply of numbers before requesting more. Unused numbers must be returned to a "pool" in blocks of 1,000 so they can be put back into circulation when needed.

"For nearly 15 years, Illinois has led the nation in creative and effective methods in number conservation," said ICC Chairman Charles Box. "Our number-pooling efforts have forestalled the need for the new 872 area code for a decade."

CUB, which fought to delay the new area code, maintains that it results in consumers being "equally, and needlessly, inconvenienced, whether they're calling across the street or across the country."

According to the ICC, people seeking additional phone lines will still be able to obtain 312 and 773 numbers -- in most cases.

kmack@tribune.com

Copyright © 2009, [Chicago Tribune](#)