

Downtown payphones going green

BY RISA POLANSKY

Payphones aren't going the way of smoke signals and the telegraph – they're going green, at least in downtown Miami.

Fort Lauderdale-based First American Telecom has begun replacing its traditional payphones in downtown Miami with solar-powered, stainless-steel kiosks that light up at night.

A prototype is up and running at Northeast 18th Street and Biscayne Boulevard.

After working on the technology for years, the company has finally found an "effective, efficient" model, said Guy Thomas Stremppack, First American Telecom vice president.

"The solar panels collect the sun during the day, and then at night it illuminates it through LED lighting," he said. "We always had a concern about high-voltage power," but the Miami sunshine provides the perfect power source.

The search was long to find "the green way of doing it, and we've finally found it," he said.

The plan is to replace at least 25 traditional downtown and Brickell payphones with the new solar model before summer, with more to come later.

In a time cell phones have taken over, it may seem strange to invest in what some may think of as outdated technology. But "pay phones are still needed, especially for the tourism in Miami," Mr. Stremppack said.

International visitors may not travel with cell phones, he said, or their mobiles may not function in the US.

As for locals, those without cells may depend

on payphones, Mr. Stremppack said, and they also come in handy when normally cell-connected folks face dreaded dead batteries or spotty service.

Also, he said, in emergencies like hurricanes, cell phone service often goes down and payphones can serve as reliable landlines.

The lighting feature also adds a safety element for those wary of using a downtown payphone at night, he added.

"We're doing everything we can to try to maintain pay phones for the public," Mr. Stremppack said.

An ancillary public service: graffiti can be easily removed from the stainless steel kiosks, he said, helping promote an image of a clean downtown.

Also, the company sends someone to inspect and clean daily, "so you'll never see graffiti on our kiosks two days in a row."

The environmentally friendly nature of the solar phone kiosks, he added, is also a bonus for the city and its residents.

As for the company, it generates revenue through payphone use – charging standard rates even for the new models – and through selling ad space on the kiosks. The prototype also boasts a city map.

More than making money, "it's just that whole green aspect," Mr. Stremppack said.

"It's not cheap, obviously, when you're dealing with solar panels and LED lighting, but we're hoping we can start something that would be a model for the rest of the country," he said. "And the perfect place to do it is Miami."



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Guy Thomas Stremppack uses a prototype of the new solar-powered payphone kiosk at Northeast 18th Street and Biscayne Boulevard.