

TRAPPED IN THE GRANADA GARAGE ELEVATOR

Not an Uplifting Experience

SUMMARY

The 2008-2009 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury (Jury) received two complaints within a seven-week period about a stalled elevator in the Granada Garage City parking structure. The incidents were similar in that the same elevator stopped with 11-15 occupants, both adults and children. Significant delays ranging from ½ to 1¼ hours were experienced before the passengers were freed.

An investigation by the Jury revealed some disturbing facts in these two situations. There are only a few technicians on the South Coast who are trained to deal with these incidents, and any response is dependent upon their availability. There are no City of Santa Barbara personnel trained to free trapped passengers. However, in a medical emergency fire department personnel can perform a rescue, but they are reluctant to act as their actions might cause great damage to the elevator doors, car, and possibly the shaft.

The City has no written protocol for dealing with these potential emergencies, nor does it have an after-incident reporting procedure to allow tracking and managing these situations. Elevator maintenance is contracted by the City with a private firm, but the City has no procedure for monitoring the maintenance records. In the first incident the emergency phone in the elevator did not work, and it was learned that there was not, nor is there now, an established procedure for testing these phones. The alarm bell located on the car has a limited audible range. Cell phone service in these elevators was unreliable.

The Grand Jury was told that these elevators are complex mechanical equipment with sophisticated electronics, and as such are subject to failure. People trapped in an elevator for an extended period of time are potentially at risk for serious life and safety issues. Given the likelihood of another elevator failure, the Jury recommends that the City of Santa Barbara establish procedures that will minimize future impacts to the public.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury conducted an investigation regarding two stalled elevator incidents in the Granada Garage. In the first case, as the elevator was descending, it stopped between the second and first floors trapping ten adults and five children. The emergency phone did not work. Cell phones did not work. There was no response to the emergency bell. The passengers waved at passers-by through exterior windows; that did not work. They yelled but several people ignored them. Finally, someone outside the car alerted the

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parking attendant who called 911. It was one hour and 15 minutes before they were freed.

In the second incident, six adults and five children were in the car. Although the phone worked this time, the person who answered at the elevator maintenance company did not identify himself and did not know where the incapacitated car was located. Instructions to “jump start” the car failed. The person on the other end said he would call for help. He was asked to call the fire department.

One of the passengers was claustrophobic and soon became panicky. One of the children was crying, saying he thought he was going to die. Cell phones did work this time and one of the passengers was able to call her husband. By now, parking lot attendants were outside the doors, but they were unable to open them. Desperate, the passengers pushed what looked like a button with a fire helmet icon on it. Nothing happened. Another cell phone call was made, this time to 911. The caller was told the fire department had been notified of their plight just three minutes earlier. The firefighters finally arrived but did not open the doors because there was no medical emergency. The passengers were told they would have to wait for the elevator mechanic to arrive before they could be freed. The entire experience lasted somewhere between 30 and 45 minutes.

The only emergency alert systems designed for the elevators are the alarm bell, which can be heard in the car but has limited audible range, and the phone system. Emergency calls go directly to a 24-hour maintenance operator. In the first case, the phone did not work, and cell phone reception was sporadic.

METHODOLOGY

The Jury reviewed letters written to City officials by passengers who had been trapped in the elevator. Members of the Jury visited two elevators in the Granada Garage and made calls from the phones in the cars.

The Jury reviewed contractor maintenance records, interviewed City transportation employees, an elevator service company representative and a former fire department official.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

In the two instances, the elevators were occupied with 11-15 adults and children whose combined weight was below the posted weight-limit of 3,500 pounds. The Santa Barbara City Fire Department was called in both incidents but was reluctant to open the elevator doors for fear of causing significant damage to the elevator car or shaft. The Jury was told that the Fire Department is capable of opening the doors in case of a medical emergency. The Granada Garage elevator design is technically complicated and a licensed repair technician, with three years of training, is the only person authorized to

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open the elevator doors to free the passengers. Four elevator service technicians cover a territory from Atascadero to Camarillo. The maintenance contract allows for a two-hour response time. The Jury was advised that operating the electrical controls necessary to facilitate removing passengers could not be performed by City staff.

The City out-sources maintenance of the elevators. By contract, the elevator service company inspects the City's elevators on a monthly basis. The service provider keeps electronic records of these monthly maintenance inspections; however, the City does not follow up to confirm maintenance is performed. The elevator phone is not part of the contracted inspection work. When the Jury tested the phone system the sound quality was poor, and the maintenance company employee was unable to understand what the jury member was saying.

The City of Santa Barbara has neither an incident report system that applies to elevator malfunction, nor a written procedure for dealing with such events. In addition, there is no requirement or procedure for reporting the incident to City management who may therefore never hear of an elevator emergency. The Jury was told five departments within Public Works all have partial responsibility for the City's elevators yet no one department has full accountability or keeps records. However, it was noted the City Fire Department maintains records of all its calls.

The State of California is required to inspect the elevators annually. The Jury was told these garage elevators were inspected in September 2008. Repair work was required and performed in December, and new certificates were issued in early January 2009. City staff was unable to locate these certificates. Certificates displayed in the elevators were out-of-date.

After both stalled elevator instances, letters were written by the passengers to city officials regarding the incidents. In only one case was there a response.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The City of Santa Barbara lacks a coherent management plan for its elevator systems.

Recommendation 1a

That the City of Santa Barbara establish a coherent management plan for its elevator systems.

Recommendation 1b

That the City of Santa Barbara establish a single point of accountability for all elevator operations.

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Finding 2

The City of Santa Barbara does not maintain records of repair work performed by the contractor on the elevators in the City parking structures.

Recommendation 2

That the City of Santa Barbara maintain records of repair work performed by contractors on elevators in the City parking structures.

Finding 3

The audible alarm system in the Granada Garage elevators has limited range.

Recommendation 3

That the alarm system be modified to directly alert a responsible agency.

Finding 4

The emergency phone service in the elevators is not inspected regularly.

Recommendation 4

That the City of Santa Barbara perform and document weekly inspections and verify that the phones in all elevators are operational.

Finding 5

The City of Santa Barbara has no established written protocol for responding to elevator malfunctions.

Recommendation 5

That the City of Santa Barbara establish a written protocol for any elevator malfunctions.

Finding 6

The City of Santa Barbara has no incident reporting system to address elevator malfunctions.

Recommendation 6

That the City of Santa Barbara implement an incident reporting system.

Finding 7

State of California Inspection Certificates in the elevators were out of date.

Recommendation 7

That current State of California Inspection Certificates be displayed in elevators upon receipt.

Finding 8

The physical address of the elevator is not posted in all elevator cars.

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Recommendation 8

That the City of Santa Barbara post the elevator location inside all elevator cars.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with *California Penal Code Section 933.05*, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each:

Mayor, City of Santa Barbara – 90 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

Recommendations 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8