

Philadelphians welcome first free public phone as a small way to resist big tech

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A group of about 20 tech-savvy engineers and programmers gathered Saturday afternoon at a Philadelphia bookstore to celebrate the installation of an old-fashioned public pay phone.

Organizers of the project hope the phone, which is free to use for calls in North America, is the first of many in the city and will help spur a restoration of the public communications infrastructure that has been eroded by cell phones carried by most Americans.

But there's more to PhilTel, the project launched this year by Mike Dank, a 31-year-old software engineer who lives in Springfield, Delaware County, and Naveen Albert, 21, a senior computer engineering major at the University of Pennsylvania.

To PhilTel supporters interviewed at the installation, the effort to restore public phones represents resistance to society's thoughtless adoption of technology they believe could be turned on a dime into a tool of oppression, [economic growth](#) for growth's sake despite the [environmental impact](#), and the planned obsolescence that induces many consumers to buy new cell phones every few years.

"There's a lot of stuff sold to us and pushed to us that we don't need," said Michael Somkuti, a computer network engineer who lives in Philadelphia.

Somkuti, 25, is a regular at Iffy Books, which is on the third floor of a mixed-use building at 319 N. 11th St. and where the phone was installed in a hallway right outside the store. Iffy Books opened in July 2021 and specializes in books and events on hacking, gardening, and generally "empowering people to be less reliant on big tech companies," its website says.

Steve McLaughlin, the owner of Iffy Books, where he hosts workshops on things like bleeding control basics, programming, and circuit-building, described the new phone as "an experiment with a shared resource."

The inspiration of PhilTel came from a project in Portland, Ore., where an engineer named Karl Anderson installed the first Futel phone in 2014, according to the Oregonian newspaper. Futel now has eight phones in that city, and one each in four other cities, including one as far away as Detroit, according to Futel's website.

Dank said in an interview that the first PhilTel telephone is a chance to show that PhilTel can successfully install a phone and keep the hardware that connects the phone to the internet working.

Media coverage, including a story in The Inquirer on Dec. 3, has brought some suggestions on where the next phone might go. Possible sites include a typewriter repair store in South Philly, a library in Kensington, and a house in West Philly by a bus stop, Dank said.

PhilTel has also received cash donations of just over \$100 and promises of equipment donations, he said. Assuming a good deal on an old pay phone, the upfront cost of installing a PhilTel phone that has been retrofitted to connect to the internet is a minimum of \$300, Dank said.

Dank bought the phone installed at Iffy Books 15 years ago for \$20 at the Leesport Farmers Market, which is north of Reading. It came from a high school in Mechanicsburg, Pa., he said.

It was not lost on the engineers and programmers at Iffy Books that the throwback device they were celebrating relies on the sort of computer networks some of them have grown wary of in their jobs.

But Mike Cramer said he found PhilTel fascinating because Dank and Albert are taking existing technological building blocks and combining them to create something new in a way that reminds him of internet culture of the 1980s and 1990s, when he was growing up and the internet had a much stronger countercultural bent.

"It's like Legos, but more complicated," said Cramer, who is 49 and works in internet security.

Albert, Dank's cofounder, said he doesn't have a cell phone and depends on pay phones when he's not at home with access to his traditional landline [phone](#), which has better sound quality and can be used for decades without needing to be replaced, he said.

"Public communications infrastructure use to be readily available," he said. "We want to make it more available again."

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