

Tragedy on the Tracks

\$172.65 lock could have saved Kyle's life

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In the big money world of SEPTA contracts, it's chump change. Just \$28,487 to fix a problem with locks on the Broad Street Subway that are too easy to pick and too inviting to curious kids.

The death of Kyle Harris, a 12-year-old from North Philadelphia who last week got past the lock on a subway motorman's booth and stuck his head out of a moving train, has thrust the small-money issue into the spotlight of a big-time criticism for the transit agency.

"It would have been a small price to pay to save the life of a child," said Tom Kline, the attorney hired by Kyle's family after SEPTA refused to release information about the July 11 accident.

SEPTA has known since 1999 that the locks were being picked by kids who would play with the subway's public-address system and lights. The agency waited until last September to start fixing the problem, sending 20 locks at a time to the company that made them. There, the locks were switched from the easy-to-pick spring-loaded style to a tougher dead-bolt style.

The cost: \$172.65 a lock. With 165 locks on the Broad Street Subway cars, that's \$28,487.

"It was not viewed as a safety problem," said SEPTA spokesman Richard Maloney. "Kids were jimmying the locks and getting into the cabs and creating these problems. We perceived that as a vandalism problem, not a safety problem."

Kline, who met with SEPTA Assistant General Manager Jim Jordan yesterday and received assurances that the agency would start cooperating with the family, said it should have been clear that the lock problem was a safety issue.

"It does not take a great leap of imagination to figure out that once a child is in the motoman's cab, a child would be equally likely to open a window and hurt himself," Kline said.

SEPTA is now sending 40 locks at a time to James L. Howard & Co., of Bloomfield, Conn., the company that made them, and is switching them to dead bolts. Temporary bolt locks have been installed on subway cars from which the old spring-locks were removed.

Maloney said yesterday the changeover will be finished in February, 18 months after the first locks were switched.

He said the company is changing the locks as quickly as it can and could not manufacture enough substitute locks to change them all at once. "It's a capacity problem," Maloney said. "This is not an off-the-shelf item."

That came as news to Fred Rotondo Jr., vice president of James L. Howard & Co., who last night said he has heard of no problems from SEPTA. Rotondo seemed shocked to learn his company's locks were a key point of concern in the death of a 12-year-old boy.

Kyle's broken body was found on the subway tracks near the Race-vine station on the night of July 11, several hours after he was last seen riding the subway home from rollerskating with friends.

"I don't know anything about that," he said. "I'm going to talk to SEPTA tomorrow and see what's going on."

Rotondo said his company was shutting down today for its annual two-week summer vacation. That could further delay the changeover of the locks. The pace of the changeover concerns Kline, who successfully sued SEPTA in 1999 on behalf of a 4-year-old boy maimed by a subway station escalator.

"How can you diagnose a problem in 1999 and expect it to be reasonable to have the problem fixed in 2002 when the issue involves public safety?" Kline asked.*