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THE FUTEL PARTY LINE

JULY 1961 -- DECEMBER 1961



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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
John Edgar Hoover, Director

Party Line

the signal lives in darkness

Issue 3, Spring 2018



Futel

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Feutel



New Feutel installation can be found at either medieval plague-ridden craphole of the distant past or neo-medieval hellscape of the not-to-distant future, we're not sure which. Anyway, if you find yourself in either of those bummer times, look for our document cache for help building a better civilization out of trash. Installation by Mykle Hansen and friends.



2017 In Review

Wildcard Line episodes 2 and 3 released

Contribute to the Wildcard Line from any Futel phone!

Presentations

Talks were given at Decon+Reuse '17, the annual conference of the Building Materials Reuse Association: "King Solomon's Mines: The Greatest Salvage Treasure Revealed In The Vault Of The Payphone", and at Open Source Bridge: "Futel: The Network We Deserve".

Grants

An Ann Arbor Awesome Foundation \$1,000 mini-grant was awarded to Futel to create a new free public phone in downtown Ypsilanti. We also received hardware grants of essential equipment from Personal Telco Project and Free Geek Portland, and from individuals. We thank our donors, which enable us to expand and maintain our operations!

New feature: Broadband Payphone Calling

Futel is pleased to announce the rollout of Broadband Payphone Calling to every Futel telephone. With Broadband Payphone Calling, the user does not need to bother with dialing or even choosing the recipient for a call. Simply choose Broadband Payphone Calling, and multiple payphones will ring simultaneously until one is picked up. Uses of Broadband Payphone Calling include oracles, weather reports, and the initiation of serendipitous friendships. You never know who you'll be talking to next with Broadband Payphone Calling - literally!

Party Line #2 published

Find back issues of Party Line at Microcosm Publishing.

Internet access for Right To Dream Too

Right To Dream Too moved to a new location on the eastside, but didn't have internet access. We were able to secure a donation of access for them from Freewire, in a partnership between Futel, Freewire, and the Village Coalition.

Continued service

Most importantly, Futel maintained service to our three public phones and phone at Right 2 Dream Too. We provided over 19 thousand free calls, including 57 which used our directory to call the mayor and 14 to call the Druid of

Sisyphus Gardens, received over 200 calls to our conference line, and received 84 contributions to our audio zine, the Wildcard Line.



Announcing Broadband Payphone Calling

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503-468-1337

2017 Operator Log Excerpts

Five operators logged over 40 operator calls in 2017, and as usual, they ranged from boring to exciting and amusing to annoying. Here is a sample of logged calls, with some sensitive and many less interesting examples removed.

2017-01-02 Caller said they had a hankering for potstickers and asked me where to go. I replied that they had a long journey ahead of them.

2017-01-26 Caller asked for the number of a social housing building, which I supplied.

2017-01-30 Caller wanted the 'East Child Welfare Office' phone number. After some searching I found it and gave it to them.

2017-02-04 Caller was curious about the futel service, our motivations, if I happened to be in that house next to the phone, what people normally call in for, etc etc. We talked for roughly 15 minutes.

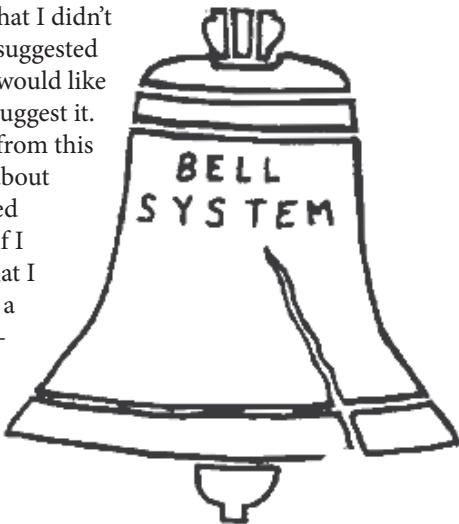
2017-02-26 Caller asked if it would snow tonight. I replied that I did not know. Caller asked my name. I replied that I was the operator. Caller told me her name and said it was nice to meet me. I thanked them and said it was nice to meet them also.

2017-03-19 Caller pushed buttons, then hung up. I called back, answerer told me their child was playing with the phone.

2017-04-02 Caller was clearly just curious about the phone, what people use the operator line for, etc. We talked for a while, I had to ask them to speak up a few times as it was rather hard to understand them. I feel like this may have been a person I talked to at length before. I mentioned some of the features of the phone that they could experience through the directory. After I mentioned it, the caller



was curious about the apology line, and wondered if they could be apologized to. I said that I didn't think that that was a feature but they suggested that that would be nice and that they would like it if that were a feature, that I should suggest it. They thought that maybe an apology from this service would make them feel better about something that they had never received an apology for. The caller then asked if I would apologize to them and I said that I wouldn't. They later apologized to me a few times and I almost ended up apologizing as well but managed not to. They closed by saying that they were sorry to take up so much of my time, I told them not to worry about it.



2017-04-15 Caller wanted a phone number. They couldn't find where the name was written down, but knew it was in the 503 area code. I told them to call back when they found it.

2017-04-15 Caller wanted the local number for a singles chat line. After some discussion we figured out the name, and I looked up and provided the number.

2017-04-26 Caller wanted to make a call. I told them to hang up and dial 1.

2017-06-13 Caller reported a broken telephone.

2017-06-14 Caller reported that they had intended to press 5.

2017-06-28 Caller asked for the locations of Futel phones, and asked if there were any in Salem or Eugene.

2017-06-30 Caller wanted the local number for a singles chat line, which I supplied.

2017-07-07 Caller pushed buttons, then hung up.

2017-08-15 Caller said an obscenity, I hung up.

2017-08-25 Caller asked for the number of a medical clinic, which I supplied.

2017-08-25 Same caller asked for the number of the same clinic. I supplied it again. Caller repeated it to me with one digit wrong, and hung up.

2017-09-05 Caller asked who I was, I replied that I was a operator. Phone was apparently given to another caller, who said hello. I hung up.

2017-09-08 Caller asked if Dave was there, which I denied.

2017-09-17 Caller was unable to call a number. I verified that another Futel phone could not call it, but my cell could. I called caller back and told them that the phone was unable to call that number, and relayed a message via text with my cell phone. Number was blocked because Futel's provider disabled non-continental US numbers, I enabled all NANPA destinations including Alaska, Hawaii, and Canada.

2017-09-20 Caller thanked futel for the three free calls, asked if it was okay to make another. I assured caller it was okay.

2017-09-21 Caller subjected me to a long monologue about the phone he was speaking into, and eventually came up with a question. I asked them to repeat it, and was treated to another long monologue which ended in mid-sentence as caller hung up.



2017-09-21 Caller needed help dialing, I instructed them to dial 1, then their number.

2017-09-24 Caller asked permission to make a call. Permission was granted.

2017-09-29 Children playing with phone.

2017-10-03 Caller wanted the incoming number for the phone, which I provided.

2017-10-11 Caller not sure why they called. I suggested hanging up, trying again.

2017-10-16 Called wanted to know how to make a call. I told them.

2017-10-18 Caller announced they were dancing the boogaloo.

2017-10-25 Was connected to some automated system: silence, then a beep, then “thank you for your call,” then disconnected.

2017-10-27 Heard children, then after I identified myself as an operator, an adult said hello, then hung up after I identified myself again. Called back, adult answered, I asked if they needed an operator, they said no, I hung up.

2017-10-27 Caller asked for the phone number of an SSI lawyer by name, which I provided.

2017-11-01 “Do I ask you to place a call?” “No, you can place it yourself.” “Okay thanks.”

2017-11-28 Caller asked for the phone number of a specific healthcare provider, which I provided.



One of the stupider recent attempts to make money off of stationary phones: the airport TV phone! Free domestic calls if you watch television for the duration!

Futel's campaign to bring back the public telephone

*and maybe the possibility that
an Ypsilanti phone may be coming soon*

Mark Maynard

June 14, 2017

Not too long ago, my friend Dug, knowing that I'd just purchased a former Michigan Bell Telephone building in Ypsilanti, put me in touch with a friend of his in Portland by the name of Karl Anderson. Karl, he told me, was looking for places to install "free payphones." Well, late this last winter, Karl and I met in Ypsilanti to discuss the evolution of telephony, how a free phone might be implemented in Ypsi, and the goals of Futel, the entity which he'd launched to put phones back in the hands of people who need them. Following is a dramatic recreation of our discussion.

MARK: Before we talk about Futel, do I understand correctly that, like me, you spent some time in the highly-lucrative zine industry back in the '90s?

KARL: I started in the '80s, doing things on my mom's office copier at night. I'd say I started making a zine that someone should actually read in the '90s, when I published C.H.V.N.K. 666, which was a zine about mutant bike culture in Portland. I didn't have any appropriate software at first. I used LaTeX.

MARK: So, how did you come to zines? When did you first realize that self-publishing was a thing?

KARL: For me, it started with gamer zines. In the '80s, there was a zine community based on play-by-mail games, like Diplomacy by Avalon Hill. I was hugely into tabletop games, role-playing games, and other nerdy things, and, while I never played Diplomacy, I came to know about it through friends.



<http://markmaynard.com/2017/06/futels-campaign-to-bring-back-the-public-telephone-and-possibility-that-an-ypsilanti-phone-may-be-coming-soon/>

And it kind of drew me in. Diplomacy made a good correspondence game. It's really abstract, and has a small number of pieces. I think the board is the entire WWII European theater but a turn can be written out similarly to chess notation, if I remember right. So there's a lot of room in a letter for discussion, and art, and philosophy, and a community of zines kind of grew up around that, from round robin letters. And people would make spinoff zines that didn't have anything to do with gaming. So, that's what set me on that path. From there, I found small press comics zines, then I moved on to mail art, which was his huge community of weirdos doing inscrutable, samizdat style art. Then, I found a lot of weirdo politics and philosophers, 6 point 3rd generation copies. Then, of course, came Factsheet Five. And, at some point, I made a website around C.H.V.N.K. 666, a mutant bicycle club I started with some friends, back in 1992, and it became a zine.

MARK: And is it safe to say that the work you've done since still has an underground press component?



Futel's Karl Anderson tests equipment at 209 Pearl Street in Ypsilanti the day after answering the above questions. bottom: Old friends Dug Song and Karl Anderson hack their way into the Landline Creative Labs communications backbone.

KARL: That's true. I never stopped making zines. All of my projects seem to have a zine associated with them.

MARK: And it was through C.H.V.N.K. that you came to know our mutual friend Dug (Song)?

KARL: Yes. When I made the C.H.V.N.K. site, I started corresponding with Dug over email, and we traded zines for a couple of years. We kept in touch, and,

when I found out he was getting Duo Security off the ground in Ann Arbor, I convinced him to hire me. And that's why you can find me stumbling around Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and Detroit several times a year. So, yeah, I tell everyone to not just share their stuff on Facebook, but to make websites, zines, anything that lets you have control instead of hoping to please the marketing algorithm. I'm living proof.

MARK: OK, let's talk about Futel. What's the idea behind it?

KARL: I have a prepared statement which I think should fully explain everything.

At Futel, we believe in the preservation of public telephone hardware as a means of providing access to the agora for everybody, and toward that goal we are privileged to provide free domestic telephone calls, voicemail, and telephone-mediated services. We do not judge the motivations of our users, or who they choose to call; if they don't have someone to call, we can provide a presence on the other end. Denial of telephony services has long been a tactic used against undesirable populations, and our devices will counteract that. But more importantly, we will help to establish a new era of communication, one in which reaching out is not only desirable, but mandatory.

To what extent are our interactions mediated by intelligent machines? Who is doing the talking when we let them decide who we interact with and what constitutes appropriate topics of communication? We believe that the time has come to greet each other not with our heads down, staring at our hands and begging for the permission of the minds that oversee our networks, but proudly, standing tall, with our eyes open and aware of our surroundings.

We are primarily driven by the basic needs that we see on the streets every day, by giving something away that is cheap for us but valuable to the recipient. But we hope that we can also build a tower of Babel on top of that, a monument of telephones and switching networks and cascading psychological structures which will give the community something else as well, something we may not appreciate until it has forever changed us.

MARK: And how did all of this come to you? Was there something specific that made you think, "It's imperative, for all the reasons outlined above, that we bring public phones back"?

KARL: The original reason was mainly just that I like payphones. Public phones were part of the cyberpunk urban furniture that we didn't expect to go away, and part of hacker history. I like street hardware, public keyboards, kiosks. And then there was a guy who mowed my lawn, but he couldn't always keep his phone paid up. He would push his mower around the neighborhood, but some days I wouldn't be home, or I wouldn't need my lawn mowed. I thought he might find

a phone and a voicemail account useful. And my street has a lot of foot traffic, there's a light rail station down the block and a lot of tent encampments around. I thought it would be interesting to see how it would get used. I just repeated all those reasons to myself until I was convinced. It might not make the most sense, but other people have continued to contribute over the years, I use that as validation.

MARK: Speaking of the history of hacking, were you ever involved in phone hacking, or phreaking?

KARL: Not me! I didn't even get a modem until 1990, and, while I did visit some scummy BBSs, I was really just an outside observer when it came to that particular scene. I may or may not have enjoyed using a red box, though.

MARK: Where was your first install, and has the vision for Futel changed at all as a result of what you've experienced thus far?

KARL: The first Futel phone is in Portland, in front of my house. I expected it to get used, given the neighborhood I'm in, but I've been surprised by how much activity it gets. But, to your question, no, the vision remains pretty much the same. We're both a social service organization and a public art project. I should add, however, that we realize all communities are different, and, for that reason, we want to allow flexibility when it comes to how the phones are configured. It depends on what the host might want, so long as the phones provide free calls.



MARK: I want to ask you more about those configuration options, but, first, I'm curious to know about the phone in front of your house... When people call the operator, are they talking with you, just a few feet away, perhaps watching them from behind a curtain?

KARL: No, I'm not creepily watching them through the window. I might be in the house they're in front of, though. Or I might be somewhere else. Or another operator might get the call. Or I might be in the house, but they may be calling from a different Futel phone... Anyway, for general paranoid reasons, Futel operators never reveal their location, or their name, to callers. I have talked with

Futel users in person before, though, if they happen to say hello to me while I'm around one of the phones.

MARK: So, speaking of operators, is scaling going to be difficult as you add more phones, and thus users to the system?

KARL: We have several operators, but we can always use more. I'd love to have more in other timezones. But, to answer your question, we don't always get every call. If you don't get an operator, though, you can always try again. Eventually someone will call you back, if you stick around. When an operator doesn't pick up, you're prompted to leave a message, and you can leave your voicemail box number, if you want a reply.



MARK: If someone out there happens to read this, and wants to find out about being an Futel operator, is there an online application or something? And can people sign up for limited shifts? Could someone, for instance, sign up for 9:00 to midnight EST the first Friday of every month?

KARL: We don't currently have limited shifts, but operators don't need to respond to every call. The system rings every operator, and, whoever wants to pick up the call just indicates their intention before being connected. As for prospective operators, they're always welcome to apply. All they have to do is call an existing operator from any Futel phone! The handbook is currently only printed in issue one of Party Line, but we could set up an orientation conference call.

MARK: Would I be right to assume that Party Line is the Futel company zine?

KARL: Yes!

MARK: So it's OK with you if not every operator call reaches an operator?

KARL: Our motto is, "Operators are sometimes standing by."

MARK: Is that your only motto, or are there others?

KARL: We also have, "The Insecure Network For Insecure People," and "Save Your Quarters For Robotron."



MARK: And what kinds of things do people ask when they do reach an operator?

KARL: There are a lot of number lookups, mostly social service things, but a large variety. I helped one person find a dating chat number, he didn't have the exact name, but he knew it was a local number. And we're asked for addresses, directions, advice...

MARK: Can you give us an example of an advice call that you've fielded?

KARL: I've given career advice. And I've told kids to stay in school.

MARK: Are there any circumstances under which you might encourage a young person to leave school?

KARL: Active shooter? Fire? Seriously, if a caller had a heavy question, I'd help them figure out how to contact more qualified help. Stay in school, kids.

MARK: So, as I understand it, not only can I, as a Futel user, pick up a handset and talk with an operator, but I can also be connected to people who happen to be in the vicinity of other Futel units, assuming they feel like picking up and talking when the phone rings. Is that right? If someone here in Ypsi wanted to talk to someone, and didn't have anyone to call, he or she could just pick up the handset and be connected to someone, say, walking by the phone in your front

yard in Portland...

KARL: Yes, that feature is called the “payphone shotgun,” and it calls every public Futel phone, as well as every payphone with an incoming number that we know about. Speaking of which, we’re always looking for more payphones to add to the system, if people know of numbers.

MARK: How many Futel phones are currently online, and how many other, non-Futel payphones are connected through the “payphone shotgun”?

KARL: In the Futel network, we currently have three public phones, and one at Right To Dream Too, which is a tent encampment – “Houseless Rest Area” – in old town. It’s a block of tents, support structures, and tiny houses, part of the Village Coalition. I know about some non-Futel payphones, but not all of them allow for incoming calls. Those are hard to find! I just collected two when passing through Chicago Union Station last weekend. I only know of one payphone in Ann Arbor, and it’s in the lobby of the Embassy Hotel, behind a locked door.

MARK: Do you happen to know how many adults in our country, as a percentage of the population, don’t have access to cell phones, landlines, etc?

KARL: I have no idea, but I think you’d be surprised. A lot of Futel users look like people who you’d expect to have phones.

MARK: I know, having discussed it with you before, you’re sensitive to privacy, but I’m curious as to what you might have learned, looking at the aggregated data. Has there been anything that surprised you concerning usage?



KARL: I don’t track or aggregate anything, but I do check the logs to look for problems and see if our money is being spent faster than we expect it to be... I did once notice in the logs that someone was using the phone on winter mornings, the same time every morning, about 3:00 – 4:00 AM. Calls get cut off after 15 minutes (so we don’t pay for hours of call time if someone leaves the phone off the hook), so this person would talk for 15 minutes, then call again, once or twice a night, for half an hour or an hour. This was in the rain, and in the winter,

so they were motivated.

MARK: I'm not sure what you mean by "money being spent."

KARL: We are buying phone service and giving it away for free. Also computer time and other related expenses.

MARK: So, by "money being spent," you're referring to the bandwidth being consumed?

KARL: I'm referring to anything that we are paying for being consumed. For a single call, that's mainly phone service minutes, but there are services that we buy or rent. We're a shoestring operation, and I try to buy the cheapest level of service we can. The main expenses are phone service and cloud computer rental, which we pay for by the minute. Next is probably phone numbers and 911 service, but that's a monthly cost.

MARK: Let's talk about payphones. How many are still in existence, and what, in your opinion, has been the impact of society of their rapid disappearance?

KARL: All I know is that they're disappearing, and the communications companies are trying to think up ideas on how to monetize that real estate, conceptual presence, and infrastructure, and they're all stupid, immoral, or both. It's a lot less fun without them. Cell phones and other pocket computers are of course useful, and not going away, but payphones still have an important place in our cities, and I don't think our phones will look so strange in the future.

Oh, wait, I have a prepared statement for that, too.

What will Futel's role be in the coming end times? As an organization whose core strategy is to glean discarded equipment on its way to the smelter and the toxic waste dump and turn it into installations which provide tools, information, and entropy to anyone who walks up to them, we are familiar with operating in the margins. Our users, also, tend to occupy several fringes of humanity, and we have seen them get erased from the city with each season.

Our position is a reminder that while local conditions may change radically, this day is not significantly more apocalyptic than any other we have experienced in our lifetimes. The devices we use and the specifics of how we encourage our users to use them will necessarily adapt, as will our message and attitude, but our mandate will not. We will establish a new era of communication, one in which reaching out is not only desirable, but mandatory.

Are we expending all of this effort only to see our payphones gleam in the rubble of the depopulated cities? Perhaps, but this was always a possible outcome. Are

we jaded due to growing up in a decade when the imminent end of the world was promised to us weekly? Probably, but this outlook has allowed us to survive and do our work. Are our motives good and our results positive? Close enough.

MARK: What would a person hear upon lifting a Futel handset and putting it to his or her ear?

KARL: You can listen for yourself here.

MARK: OK, one of the choices is voicemail. Can people actually set up voicemail through Futel?

KARL: Yes, and voicemail can be left or checked from the incoming line. We would like to be able to give out numbers that would go directly to voicemail



accounts someday – the caller wouldn't know that you didn't have a phone. On Futel, nobody knows you're a CHUD.

MARK: OK, so there's a reference to conference calls. What's that all about?

KARL: It's a party line.

MARK: And the "wildcard line"?

KARL: That is an audio zine, basically call and response. Users can contribute from any Futel phone. Currently, you can only hear it from the phone, although I plan to put them on the net when I get time.

MARK: So people are prompted to say something... tell a story, describe what's happening where they are, etc... and your intention is to aggregate all of that

into an audio zine that could, one day, be shared online, as well as through Futel phones.

KARL: Two episodes are already shared through the phone. I like to give phone users something special, so they get everything first. But you can hear at least one episode on the incoming line – 503 HOT 1337.

MARK: So, here in Ypsi, assuming we move forward, how much flexibility would we have in configuring our menu?

KARL: We will be making a custom menu for Ypsi. We really should get the mayor's number in there, and relevant social services, whatever else you want. The only real constraint is that it's a slow process right now to push changes.

MARK: Can you give us an idea of the kinds of numbers you're sharing on other Futel phones?

KARL: Besides the mayor, we have a directory of social service numbers and a directory of amusing numbers. The social service numbers are things like 211, a transportation service called Call To Safety, bus schedules, things like that. The amusing numbers include the Apology Line, which is one of our inspirations, it's basically voicemail discussions as social art.

MARK: What about emergency calls? Is there any risk, given how the system is configured, that emergency calls may not go through? I mean this is all contingent on the wireless being operational and the internet being up, right? I'm just wondering if there's any responsibility, when you plane a public phone outside, to ensure that it connects... Is that something that you've thought about?

KARL: There is always risk, and there is great responsibility. If the power or net goes down, the phone goes down. All I can say is that reliability is the first priority, we monitor and notice when a phone isn't connecting, and we test emergency calls with each release, and we've been more reliable than other payphones in the area. One user had to run over a mile and pass two non-working phones to use ours. One user had difficulties and got an operator to make a call. I do fear that someone will spend time someday trying to use a non-working Futel phone in an emergency. But I am certain that it is a net positive, the phones have been used to get emergency medical services at least twice.

MARK: Are there other areas of the country that you'd like to see Futel phones deployed?

KARL: Anywhere that gets public usage, although these days we want to get funded upfront before committing hardware, and someone local needs to be a point person.

MARK: What makes a community right for Futel? Are there certain demographic factors that you consider?

KARL: If we think there is a community that will use any aspect of a phone, it's a good place. We're supported by grants, so the ability to pay for everything is one factor. But if there are local stewards, we have low-cost options that are easier to start up.

MARK: I hear that you've got a grant being considered to roll out Futel payphones in multiple homeless encampments around Portland. Is that correct?

KARL: Yes! I don't want to go into details until we know what happens there. But we will be putting some kind of service in several sites. If we don't get this grant, we'll just give them something less ambitious and figure out how to pay for it until we do get one.

MARK: OK, so the first time you were out here in Ypsi, we talked about putting a Futel phone outside the offices of Landline Creative Labs at 209 Pearl Street. And, since then, if I'm correct, you received an Ann Arbor Awesome Foundation grant to make it happen. Assuming that's the case, what kind of timeline are we talking about? When might we see a Futel shell across from the Ypsi Transit Station?

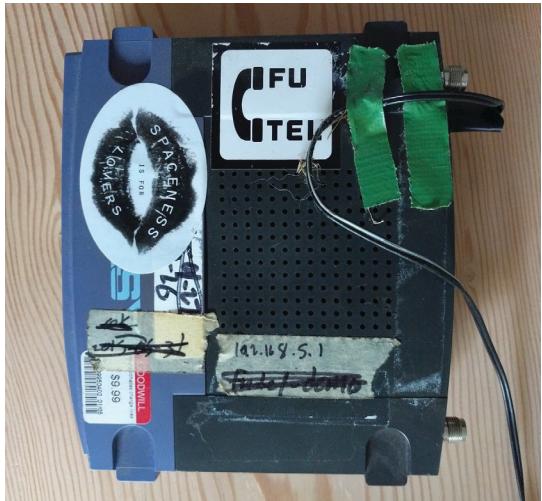
KARL: I'm bringing hardware tomorrow, I like to bake it for a while and make sure it stays connected, then we just need to ship the outdoor hardware and have you connect it. I have everything, just need to refurb the enclosure and figure out how to ship it cheaply. I'm relying on your expertise to install and maintain it. By the way, I hope to sneak an Ann Arbor phone installation in on the same grant. But that's still to be determined.



Support Futel!

Futel is made possible by volunteers and contributors, who we thank! Futel is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and contributions are tax deductible.

Support us by subscribing on Patreon, buying a T-shirt or button on Spreadshirt, buying Party Line issue 1 or issue 2 from Microcosm Publishing, or making a PayPal donation courtesy of Umbrella on our website.



Want to hack on Futel? See our repositories on Github. Creator of interactive audio art? We can help you implement your ideas in this exciting new format.

Dial 0 from any Futel phone, or speak to the operator at 503-468-1337, or email us at operator@futel.net, or see our website at <http://futel.net>. Thanks to everyone who has supported Futel!



Acknowledgements

Operators

KRA, Tishbite, developers. KRA, Tishbite, xnor, B. M, M. Lippincott, A. Frankenstein, M. Hansen, operators. B. Casey, M. Casey, M. Lippincott, R. Senior, S., physical plant. D. Wager, HR. J. Plumb, xnor, production. B. Thunderblood, art. J. Mejia, B. Richardson, media.

Contributors

Thanks to xnor, G Upshaw, and M Hansen for siting public telephones.

Futel's 2017 operations are funded in part by a 2016 Precipice Fund grant, funded by Precipice Fund, Calligram Foundation, and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Futel's 2017 operations are funded in part by a donation from Nelson.

Futel's 2017 operations are funded in part by a donation from Awesome Ann Arbor.

Thanks to the Regional Arts and Culture Council, Awesome Portland, Russell Senior, the Personal Telco Project, Free Geek Portland, ToorCamp, and Ctrlh for their support.

Thanks to Drew at MOHDI and B. Davis for donating labor and materials. Thanks to B-Line Urban Delivery, Hobotech, and Snap-tortoise for donating services. Thanks to everyone who has donated time, money, expertise, and materials.

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