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Drivers no longer lose radio reception in tunnels

 By [Jim Ritchie](#)
 TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Saturday, July 30, 2005

Hey listen, there's no static.

A group of engineering students and staff at Carnegie Mellon University has fixed the daily commuter annoyance of losing radio reception while passing through the Fort Pitt and Squirrel Hill tunnels.

Radios long have gone silent in the tunnels for the nearly quarter-million motorists who drive them daily because the hillsides block radio waves. That's frustrating for drivers who miss news, traffic reports or a favorite song. Nearly 120,000 drivers use the Squirrel Hill Tunnel and about 121,000 motorists drive the Fort Pitt Tunnel each day.

The solution to keeping people tuned in came from a band of CMU volunteers, led by electrical and computer engineering professor Dan Stancil. The group developed a way to bring radio waves into vehicles traveling through the tunnels.

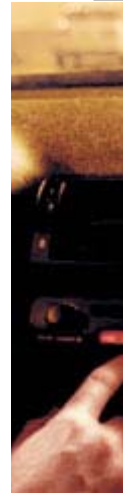
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"It is a fascinating idea because what we're doing isn't consuming a whole lot of time, but making a huge impact on a lot of people who listen to the radio," said J.P. Van't Hof, 27, a graduate student from Grand Rapids, Mich.

FM radio has been available in the F

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Keith Hodan.

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since about July 4 and in the Squirrel Hill Tunnel about two months.

"They've been good," said PennDOT Steve Marsinko. "The students put a lot of effort to set up the system. It took a lot of time and, hopefully, gave them good jobs."

Not only did Stancil's group solve a complex problem, they did it at little cost. The Fort Pitt Tunnel was about \$15,000. He received estimates from contractors for about \$100,000.

"I think a big part of this is wanting to give something back to the city," said graduate student Ben Henty, 27, of Newtown.

The idea started with Stancil's son, Brian, who drove to a summer job in Monroeville through the Squirrel Hill Tunnel daily and decided there must be a way to wire the tunnel so motorists could hear their radios.

"He got annoyed that he lost his favorite song every time he went through the tunnel," Dan Stancil said. "Brian took this as a challenge."

Then a Virginia Tech student, Brian Stancil now works at the National Robotics Engineering Center, a part of CMU's Robotics Institute.

After Brian Stancil got PennDOT's permission to work at the tunnel, his father recruited volunteers for his engineering classes. They've been working on the two tunnels since about 2000.

An early attempt to provide radio reception didn't last. High winds in the tunnel, caused by heavy equipment, unfastened wiring in the equipment the group installed. The new equipment is designed to use a cable that can withstand the conditions.

The system works by connecting radio antennas mounted outside the tunnels to equipment in the crawl space above the tunnel roofs. That equipment retransmits the radio signals for motorists to pick up.

Most of the nearly 20 students who have worked on the project are, or were, graduate students in Dan Stancil's classes. Other students volunteered because they had an interest. Van't Hof's fellow student Jessica Hess spearheaded the Fort Pitt Tunnel project.

There's still more work to be done.

The students plan to resume work in the tunnels in the next few months to boost the AM signal so motorists can hear some AM stations, but not all. When the work is done, motorists will hear an improved signal from stations they could receive if they were walking outside.

In the Squirrel Hill Tunnel, motorists can tune in FM stations but not AM stations.

The group has no plans to work in the Liberty Tunnel, where motorists can hear AM static.

Other antennas in the Fort Pitt Tunnel allow cell phone users to talk without disconnecting.

T-Mobile, a cell phone provider, recently improved its equipment in the Fort Pitt Tunnel to service. Verizon and Nextel also have signal-boosting equipment in the tunnel.

Pittsburgh police also have equipment in place to maintain radio communications. "That's for us," police spokeswoman Tammy Ewin said.

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