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Gates & Emergency Response

The Perfect Storm For Disaster

By Pete Sutsos

Gates and emergency access control. These terms should go hand in hand. However, many manufacturers and contractors generally treat emergency access control as an afterthought that can bring catastrophic consequences. Even worse, some contractors give this looming problem no thought at all. Offering your customers the option of installing a comprehensive emergency access-control system, married to a gate operator that is outfitted with adequate battery support to “fail in the open” condition when the power goes out, are critical safety components to any gate installation.

I recently became aware of an incident that occurred in Shell Beach, Calif. A resident of a gated community was having a heart attack, and, when the emergency responders arrived at the gate, they discovered that their master key override would not operate due to a massive power failure. The time it took for them to find alternate means to enter the gated compound ultimately contributed to the death of the resident.

A delayed emergency response under any situation is absolutely intolerable and preventable. For the fire agency to take the time to mandate the master key override system and not take the extra step of adding a “fail in the open” battery backup is commonplace, and yet does not meet the needs of the agency or those they are responding to help in the emergency. To quote Fire Inspector Laura Brown, “In an emergency, every second counts.” These seconds that tick away while the emergency responders fumble with keys or other such devices – or stop to determine if the gate is actually operational during a power failure situation – are crucial. Response time can easily be improved upon with newer technology and adequate battery-support systems.

The two national agencies who, for various reasons, have yet to address the issue of emergency access control are



The Door And Systems Manufacturers Association (DASMA) and The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Neither of these agencies has shown an interest in setting even a minimal level of acceptable safety standards to which the industry needs to comply – or, even more importantly, setting some compliance standards for the public-safety and fire-safety communities to follow.

Until DASMA or NFPA set some form of national compliance emergency access-control standard, you, the contractor, should be filling in this gap for your customers and the local public-safety agency. Consider installing emergency access-control systems that incorporate some of the following features:

- The ability to be “mutual aid” compatible. This allows multiple responders, agencies or services equal access to gates and other such barriers.
- An emergency access-control system that facilitates a faster response time.
- An emergency access-control system that supports officer-friendly operation. This means a system that does not compromise the safety of law enforcement, whose reasons for response can be life-saving in nature, but who operate under different circumstances than that of a medical aide.

- Every gate is installed or retrofitted with “fail in the open” battery support so that, when the power is out, the gate will be left open.

Lastly, most gate manufacturers incorporate some form of “manual override” or “fail safe” technology in their gate systems. The problem here is that not all are alike and not all operate the same way. Adding this kind of confusion to the emergency responders who are trying to get past the gate or barrier when the power is off-line causes severe delays and compounds an already difficult problem. Thus, there are plenty of reasons to seek some form of national compliance standard to deal with the issue of emergency access control.

To conclude, it is imperative that you, as the contractor, take the lead – absent any formal action by DASMA or NFPA – to educate your customers and local public-safety officials of what can be done to make automatic gates operate more safely for the emergency response that may some day come. **PDD**

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