

CONNECTICUT POST

NEW ENGLAND NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

THURSDAY January 15, 2009

TICKET TROUBLE

Nearly 600 Metro-North pass holders overcharged

By Rob Varnon
STAFF WRITER

Metro-North Railroad said nearly 600 people were double billed when buying monthly passes in the first week of January.

The double-billing happened when the railroad went live with new computer software that week.

The railroad sent out a mass e-mail Tuesday alerting affected customers that the problem was discovered Jan. 5 and fixed Jan. 9. The railroad apologized for the problem and said the accounts affected would be credited by Wednesday.

Dan Brucker, a Metro-North spokesman, said the problem was limited to the 588 monthly riders who buy their tickets through a work-sponsored program that allows part of the price of the ticket to be paid for out of their pre-tax income.

For example: A commuter's monthly ride costs \$200. Normally, \$120 of the cost is taken through the pre-tax program while the remaining \$80 is taken from the rider's bank or credit card account. What happened in this case, Brucker said, is the new program failed to credit the first payment of \$120 and took the whole \$200 out of the rider's account.

Brucker said five customers almost immediately noticed the billing error and notified the railroad, which found the problem Jan. 5.

Refunds were transmitted Jan. 9 and were still being processed Wednesday, Brucker said.

The billing problem was less of a concern to one Metro-North rider than the railroad's failure to protect the privacy of the e-mail addresses of those affected.

"I think it is admirable that they addressed the problem so quickly," said Michael Hayes, a Monroe resident who takes the train daily from Bridgeport to his job with an investment firm in Stamford. "But I was amazed at the fact that I could see everyone's e-mail address, especially in this day and age when identity theft is such a well-publicized problem."

The e-mail Metro-North sent out did not hide the list of e-mail addresses receiving the message. While the list contained a lot of Hotmail and Gmail accounts, which are created through Microsoft and Google's portals, respectively, many corporate e-mails were exposed, including some belonging to workers at General Electric Co., Pitney Bowes Inc. and Royal Bank of Scotland.

RBS and Pitney Bowes declined comment on the issue because no employees had complained. There is also nothing illegal about revealing e-mail accounts in America.

Brucker said in the rush to get the notice out to affected customers, the e-mail addresses were inadvertently exposed.

But Tarek Sobh, dean at the University of Bridgeport Engineering School and a doctor in computer science engineering, said, "The problem with this is not only privacy. There are these folks out there that harvest e-mails ... and sell the addresses."

That's how spammers can get ahold of targets, Sobh said. While it's not illegal to not hide an e-mail address, "The possibility of this ending up in an inappropriate place is high," he said. For instance, someone could take the e-mail and place it on a newsgroup or blog and then the spammers have it.

Metro-North
e-mail showed
all addresses