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Boston inventor Robert Tendler is suing OnStar Communications.

## Museum sees him as GPS pioneer; he hopes patent suit judge agrees

By Hiawatha Bray  
GLOBE STAFF

Boston inventor Robert Tendler is being recognized by the Smithsonian Institution for his ground-breaking work with global positioning technology. He hopes a federal court in Texas will recognize it, too.

The nation's most prestigious museum has acquired prototypes of Tendler's FoneFinder, his early effort to

combine GPS location technology with a cellphone. "Cellphones have become an intrinsic element of Americans' lives and Mr. Tendler's work paved the way for universal adaptation of GPS technology," said Brent Glass, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Meanwhile, Tendler has filed suit in US District Court in Tyler, Texas, against OnStar Communications Inc., a General

Motors Corp. business unit that installs location-based communications systems in cars. Tendler says that OnStar's technology, introduced to the public in 1996, violates a patent that Tendler received last year.

"I filed for this patent before they had a product going," said Tendler. "This thing has been pending in the patent office since 1996." Tendler is seeking an

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unspecified amount of compensation for patent infringement.

An attorney for OnStar declined to comment on the lawsuit.

A lifelong tinkerer, Tendler graduated from Amherst College with a degree in philosophy, and minors in math and physics. He combined his interest in science with a law degree from George Washington University, and became a patent lawyer.

In addition to his legal work, Tendler has been an active inventor with nearly a dozen patents to his name. He says that perhaps eight bear on the GPS phones now on the market. Up to now, "I haven't pressed the issue," said Tendler. "What I wanted to do is make products and help people."

In the 1980s, when GPS technology was young, he developed Mayday Mike, a radio for use by boaters. At the touch of a button, the radio would use a speech syn-

thesis circuit connected to a GPS device to broadcast the boat's latitude and longitude.

As cellular phone service caught on, Tendler tried to come up with a portable phone that would work the same way. By 1997, he'd built FoneFinder, a device that attached to the top of an Audiovox cellphone. A user would push a red emergency button on the FoneFinder, which would dial 911 and loudly pronounce the latitude and longitude of the phone. Emergency workers could use the GPS data to find the caller's address.

Tendler says he raised over \$1 million to bring FoneFinder to market, but was unsuccessful. Goaded by the Federal Communications Commission, phone makers began working on their own GPS-assisted phones. Today's models transmit location data digitally, rather than by voice. But Nance Briscoe, the museum's cu-

rator in the history of integrated circuits, said the FoneFinder technology is an important precursor of present-day GPS phones. "I've not found other challengers to date for the technology Bob Tendler developed," Briscoe said. So she persuaded Tendler to donate some prototype FoneFinders to the museum.

"They will be available for researchers, scholars, the general public, once the museum opens," Briscoe said. The museum closed for renovations last fall, and is due to reopen in the summer of 2008.

Meanwhile, Tendler will press his suit against OnStar, which could bring a substantial windfall if he's successful. And he won't rule out the possibility of suing cellular providers if he wins the OnStar case. "First things first," he said.

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