

See metro.net Oct 23: [Catoe Sees Urgent Need for Two New Divisions](#)
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Man on a Mission

MTA Deputy CEO John Catoe Focuses Transit Operations on Customers

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Oct. 23, 2001) John Catoe, the MTA's new deputy CEO, is a man on a mission – a mission to focus Transit Operations and the energies of its people on the customer. "We're on a journey, a journey to be the best in providing services to our customer," he says.

Catoe emphasized this goal repeatedly in an hour-long interview, Oct. 19, with MTA Report. He noted that CEO Roger Snoble has asked him to concentrate on Operations, in effect, raising the profile of that division.

"The entire intent of this is to elevate Operations up in the organization," he says. "We're paid good money to be professional, to focus on our customers."

During the interview, Catoe outlined his goals for Transit Operations, the urgent need for two additional operating divisions, a shift to regional operations, greater cooperation with municipal operators and partnership with the MTA's unions.

With hardly two weeks in his new post, Catoe is still taking the measure of the MTA. "I have run into an incredible number of dedicated employees who yearn for a positive change in the way we operate our services – or, at least, a change in the public's perception of how we operate our services."

Clean fleet by November 1

An early effort, with a deadline of Nov. 1, is to achieve a fleet of clean buses. "I have a pet peeve," he says, "I don't like to see dirty wheels on

PROFILE

- John B. Catoe, 54, resident of Santa Monica.
- 22 years of public transit experience as Director of Transit Services, City of Santa Monica's Big Blue Bus, and with the Orange County Transportation, including five years as Director of Operations.
- Bachelor of Science, Business Administration, University of Redlands
- Member of American Public Transportation Association; American Society for Public Administration; Vice Chair and Executive Committee member, California Transit Association; Board Member, National Conference for Community and Justice.
- Personal: Native of Washington, D.C., he is a single parent of a 13-year-old son, Justin.
- Pet: a golden retriever mix, Blondie.
- Hobbies: camping and hiking with Justin, gardening as a stress reliever.

buses. If you pay attention to the wheels, you'll pay attention to the outside...(and) to the inside."

And if the MTA pays attention to those things, he adds, "We'll have clean buses and rail cars, clean rail stations and bus stops."

Another of Catoe's goals is to alter the process of how decisions are made – a process that will direct management's efforts more toward leadership, providing resources and direction, while providing support to employees at the operational level "who are truly providing our services."

A key element in making change happen will be a cooperative working relationship with the MTA's unions.

"My philosophy is that the unions are our partners," says the deputy CEO. "We have the same mutual goal, and that is to provide a workplace in which our employees feel productive and enjoy coming to work and are treated fairly and are fairly compensated."

Here are excerpts from other parts of the interview:

What attracted you to the MTA?

I have a passion for transportation services. I hear the public's perception of transportation programs and transit, specifically, and it's negative. When the reality is that we carry half a billion people a year. We have one of the most productive light-rail lines in the country, but that's not the perception. The perception is that we don't have a good transportation system. We need to change that.

I want this agency to become the best there is in transportation services. And I fully, deep inside myself, believe we can get there.

You've indicated that you're initially focused on Transit Operations.

The CEO wants me to focus on Operations for two major reasons: First, to deliver transit services to our customers, including freeway services, planning and the other elements we provide, but the biggest is the bus and rail system.

And, second, project delivery. The MTA has a responsibility for regional planning of transportation services and programs, and we have a responsibility as a pass-through agency for funding.

Transit in this county includes 16 municipal operators. What is the MTA trying to achieve in our relationship with the munis?

The CEO's philosophy is that, as a regional planning agency, we have to look at how to provide excellent service to the customer. That means that we at the MTA have to back away from the idea that "we" are the provider of services and, instead, realize that all of us, including our municipal agency partners, are the providers of service.

We're developing a regional transit plan, as part of the Long-

Range Transportation Plan, that is inclusive of all of our services...down to the specifics of what services each municipal operator provides. When we report to the Board in the future about transit services, it will be about countywide transit services.

We just signed a pass agreement with Montebello Bus Lines that we hope the Board will approve. A passenger can now use an MTA pass on any of Montebello's bus lines. We set a target that, by the end of October 2002, we'll have a regional pass (that will) be accepted anywhere in the county.

One of the sensitive points about the MTA's relationship with the munis is the feeling by some employees that we'll only lose more bus lines.

This is not an attempt to take MTA services away and give them to someone else. This is an attempt to create a system in which ridership will grow throughout the system. The reality is that, because of our size, our ridership probably will grow larger. This will require more vehicles and operators, mechanics and service attendants. We're not going to give up anything that takes away jobs from existing MTA employees.

Do you plan to make any changes in your staff or the Transit Operations structure?

I'm bringing in a staff director (Cynthia Gibson, currently marketing and public relations coordinator at Santa Monica Transit), but that's not to change anyone's responsibility, that's to help implement the process I talked about, as well as to help me with some of the other initiatives we'll be working on. I'm still accessing the reporting responsibilities, but the reality is that I'm a different person than who was here before me...but I'm not coming in with the thought that I'm going to change all these things.

(As for the structure), the focus will be: are we structured in the best way to provide the services we provide. And the question should be asked, "How do we change to improve, not change for the sake of change."

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