

The Challenge: Reorganizing the MTA for More Responsive Customer Service



MTA CEO Roger Snoble

By BILL HEARD, Editor
(Dec. 10, 2001) "The challenge here in Los Angeles," says CEO Roger Snoble, "is how to make a big agency like this much more responsive to the geographic areas it serves."

In a Dec. 6 interview with *MTA Report*, Snoble explored the various elements of that challenge, elements that range from a reorganization that would create up to five regional service sectors, to the role of communities in shaping local service, to cooperation with the MTA's unions in developing the service sector concept.

He also touched on streamlining the MTA's response to customers and "flattening" the organization by eliminating layers at Headquarters. But, he ruled out employee layoffs or reductions in force as part of his plan.

"In many different areas, we have way more people than we need and that's a complication," he said. "But, I'm not looking at layoffs, per se. I'm looking at how we can trim back with attrition so that we can get leaner over time. That's a lot more efficient and a lot less disruptive."

Snoble also denied that reorganizing into service sectors is merely a cost-cutting plan, although he believes that the change will, ultimately, reduce operating costs.

Our driving force

"Our total effort is aimed at providing excellent transit service to our customers," he said. "That's our driving force now and always will be."

Snoble said he and Deputy CEO John Catoe had discussed "from the very beginning" how the MTA might be reorganized into regional units with on-site, customer-oriented management. They also considered transit zones to be a "draconian" approach that would be unnecessarily destructive to the agency and painful for its employees.

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Creating MTA-operated service sectors seemed to be a better answer. Snoble and Catoe wanted to develop a plan that would keep the MTA intact while satisfying the need for better, more locally responsive service.

With the sector concept in mind, the MTA's service area seemed to naturally divide into four parts: the San Fernando Valley, San Gabriel Valley, Central Los Angeles and the Southbay. The gateway cities in the south and east sections of the county might comprise a fifth sector.

The CEO acknowledged that having the first service sector up and running by July 2002 is daunting, but he noted that much of the structure already is in place at the operating division level. An employee task force, led by Transit Operations Staff Director Cynthia Gibson, is working out the details.

Decisions at the local level

Snoble said the various sectors might develop differently, depending on circumstances, but he emphasized the need to make service decisions at

the local level. "This has been tried before with regions, I understand, but we really didn't adequately staff those regions to give them the tools they needed."

Among the "tools" Snoble would give a sector's management would be administrative staff, service planners and schedulers, bus dispatchers, accounting, procurement, community relations, security, information systems technicians and Human Resources, which would be responsible for personnel administration and recruiting.

"One of the good ideas that's come out of the employee task force working on the service sector concept is local recruiting," he said. "Why should someone who lives in the Valley come all the way downtown for a job?" He notes that represented employees would retain their seniority and other rights spelled out in labor agreements.

Managing locally, recruiting locally also meld into the CEO's belief that strong community involvement is essential if service sectors are to be responsive to their customers. "You need public input," he said.

Formally, that input would come from operational oversight by a local council, commission or even an area's Council of Governments. The MTA Board will have to adopt a set of policies delegating a certain amount of authority to sub-regional councils.

Close to the action

Informally, sector planners, schedulers and community relations personnel would receive comments from customers. These comments would have much greater impact than they currently do, Snoble believes, because a sector staff would be on-scene, close to the action and better able to respond to local needs and conditions.

The CEO also stressed the importance of cooperating with union leadership as the sector concept continues to be developed. "We want them to be part of the task force. We don't want to do this in a vacuum."

Snoble also was asked whether the MTA can accomplish two major initiatives – a reorganization into service sectors and the new safety program – within the same general time frame.

"Safety is a fundamental part of our business," he said. "To me, part of being a good manager, part of being a good employee is to be safe and to make sure you're not making it unsafe for those around you. That initiative fits right into the quality service initiative."

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