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New Rules Will Prohibit Cell Phone Use by Metro Bus Operators

- **Similar policy will apply to all employees**

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Feb. 18, 2004) Beginning March 1, Metro Bus operators will be prohibited from using cell phones of all types while "operating equipment or walking in division yards." A policy banning use of hand-held wireless phones in agency vehicles soon will apply to all MTA employees.



Deputy CEO John Catoe says the new rule for bus operators is aimed at improving safety for employees and Metro patrons. "We're focusing on the operators, first, because they're driving vehicles with multiple passengers."

A policy prohibiting any employee from using a hand-held wireless phone while driving an MTA vehicle is currently being developed. The policy, however, would permit the use of a hands-free device if it can be used safely.

"Using a hand-held phone in an MTA vehicle will be a safety rule violation," says Catoe. "If you have an accident while using a hand-held phone, that will be taken into consideration of whether it's a chargeable accident."

Growing national trend

MTA's new cell phone use policies follow a growing national trend by many states and jurisdictions to outlaw the use of hand-held wireless phones while driving. The State of California and the City of Los Angeles both are considering such actions.

While the agencywide ban on hand-held phones is being developed, the more specific rule will go into effect March 1 prohibiting Metro Bus operators from using any type of wireless phone – including those with hands-free devices – while their bus is in operation.

"It's a safety issue," says Catoe. MTA and the United Transportation Union worked out an agreement to increase the seriousness of the offense. "We had numerous complaints about cell phone usage by operators."

A labor agreement "side letter," signed Jan. 22 by MTA and UTU General Chairman James Williams, escalates the "unauthorized use of cell phones while operating equipment or walking in division yards" from a minor safety infraction to a major violation subject to progressive disciplinary action.

'A dangerous thing'

"It's a dangerous thing," a UTU spokesman told the Los Angeles *Daily News*. "The union believes it is not safe for a driver to be on the cell phone when he's operating a bus unless it's an emergency."

Violating the cell phone rule is ranked in the MTA-UTU side letter as a major safety infraction along with playing radios and audio players, using ear phones and eating or drinking while driving revenue and non-revenue vehicles.

Any need bus operators may once have had to communicate with Bus Operations Control by cell phone is coming to a close. By the end of April, all 2,400 Metro Buses will have been refitted with a new, state-of-the-art radio system as part of the ATMS project.

"My hope is that no operator is seen using cell phones while driving," says Catoe. "The intent is to stop the behavior."

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