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Automated Voice System Being Installed in Metro Buses

- Finish 90 percent of fleet by March 2005
- System is passenger-friendly, improves safety

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Dec. 8, 2004) By the end of March 2005, some 98 percent of the Metro Bus fleet will feature a computer program capable of recognizing and announcing the 18,500 bus stops and transfer points on the 189 routes in Metro's 1,433 square mile service area.

A vehicle equipped with the Automated Voice Annunciator (AVA) system will announce bus line destinations to patrons waiting at curbside and will automatically provide passengers with on-board verbal and visual announcements of all stops and transfer points along the route.

The Automated Voice Annunciator system was recently installed and is now operational on 78 buses at Venice Division 6. West Hollywood Division 7 is next in line for AVA installation, followed by Gateway Division 10 before the end of December.

Once the Westside/Central sector buses have been converted to AVA, consultants will install the system on buses in the Gateway sector and then in the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valley sectors. South Bay sector buses should be converted by the end of March.

Nation's largest fleet

When the AVA system is activated and operational in all of the 2,400-bus fleet, Metro will have the nation's largest fleet of AVA-equipped buses.

A bus equipped with the AVA system "recognizes" every bus stop, cross street and transfer point along its route. Assigned to another bus line, it is easily re-programmed when the operator signs on with a "smart card" ID badge.

AVA is an element of the Advanced Transportation Management System (ATMS). ATMS includes a voice and data radio system, automatic passenger counter and computer-aided communications dispatch equipment in the Bus Operations Center (BOC).

ATMS also links the BOC with road supervisor vehicles, Metro tow trucks and vault trucks, as well as with field equipment technician vehicles.

'Most visible aspect'

"AVA is the most visible aspect of the ATMS project to the public," says Tom Jasmin, director of Operations Control. "Because it calls all

stops automatically, it allows the operator to concentrate more on the safe operation of the bus."

AVA also makes passenger loading and off-loading more efficient, Jasmin says. The curbside announcement helps prevent passengers from boarding the wrong bus, while the on-board announcements give riders time to gather their belongings and prepare to get off.

The verbal announcements also assist the visually impaired, says Joe Vicente, assistant director of Operations New Technology Support. Next-stop information, which is displayed visually on a variable message board above the operator's head, is helpful to the hearing impaired.

'Safer and more convenient'

"The AVA system helps project the image that Metro is really taking care of its customers," says Vicente. "It makes riding the buses safer and more convenient."

The AVA project took shape last June, when Motorola consultants began preparing digital files for all bus stops, cross streets and transfer points, says ATMS Project Manager Tom Pope. The verbal announcements then were professionally recorded in a studio in Texas.

Thousands of information bits were downloaded into Division 6 buses, which then were driven over the various routes to test the system's accuracy.

"With more than 18,000 bus stops," says Pope, "and to get every stop programmed accurately was technically very challenging."