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Cell Phone Users Can Summon Roadside Help on Freeways

- New #399 number for non-emergency calls begins, July 1
- 9-1-1 will remain in effect for emergency calls

By RICK JAGER

(June 24, 2005) Starting July 1, motorists who experience non-emergency problems on LA County's freeways can dial #399 on their cell phones to summon roadside assistance from the Metro Freeway Service Patrol or their automobile club.

Metro and the Los Angeles County Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (LA SAFE) announced the new program, Thursday. Motorists using their cell phones will be connected to a live operator.

"With the influx of cell phone technology, this makes perfect sense in expanding the freeway call box program," said Board Chairman Frank Roberts.

LA SAFE anticipates that the introduction of the #399 number will reduce the burden on the 9-1-1 emergency system. Motorists can call when they need assistance for such non-emergency situations as running out of gas, a flat tire or a vehicle mechanical malfunction out of the freeway travel lanes.

#399 doesn't replace 9-1-1

The new cell phone #399 number does not replace the 9-1-1 emergency number. Motorists should continue to use 9-1-1 when requesting medical, fire or law enforcement response or reporting a hazard on a freeway travel lane.

"This is a great tool in our effort to reduce traffic congestion on our freeways," said Los Angeles Mayor-Elect Antonio Villaraigosa. "It will benefit the motorist looking for immediate assistance and also will help all Los Angeles County residents and the California Highway Patrol by providing a reliable and easy alternative for motorists to call when they need help."

Officials estimate motorists using the #399 number will make an average of 10,000 calls per month in the first year. LA SAFE won't charge the caller to handle the call, but cell phone companies may charge callers for the minutes they use.

Safety-themed Metro "take one" is also online at www.metro.net

As the #399 number goes into service, the number of calls from freeway call boxes has dropped from about 40,000 a month in the 1990s to about 9,000 a month today.

'Comes at a great time'

"The introduction of this new non-emergency cell phone number comes at a great time as we plan to expand the successful Metro Freeway Service Patrol program on Southland freeways," said CEO Roger Snoble.

Effective July 1, the Metro Freeway Service Patrol will expand selected weekday and weekend service in existing patrol areas providing service from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 10 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. on the weekends. The number of Metro Freeway Service Patrol tow trucks will increase from 33 to 44 in midday during the week and from 28 to 42 on the weekends.

Funding for the new #399 non-emergency cell phone number is provided by LA SAFE, which obtains its revenues from an annual \$1 vehicle registration surcharge assessed on each vehicle registered in Los Angeles County. Cost of the program is estimated at \$1 million a year.

LA SAFE was created in 1988 and is responsible for providing motorist aid services in Los Angeles County.

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