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Underground Like a Second Home for Metro Construction Manager

BY JIMMY STROUP

(March 7, 2006) Involved in the construction industry for nearly 40 years — “mostly underground” — Metro Senior Construction Manager Fred Smith has seen his fair share of holes in the ground. So overseeing the excavation in East LA for the Gold Line’s Eastside Extension is nothing he can’t handle.

“I’ve been in the construction industry since 1968. I’ve worked in most of the western states in hard rock mines, in soft ground mines, in copper mines, in gold mines,” he says. “So my whole career and my whole exposure have always been in an underground environment.”

A Metro employee since 1995, Smith credits the agency with broadening his construction horizons — for getting him out into some fresh air for a change.

“I think the first actual real exposure to surface work that I’d ever had was right here at Metro,” says Smith of his work on the parking lot and bridge over the 101 Freeway near Universal Studios in Hollywood.

The new types of construction work didn’t give Smith any pause, though, and he says simply that “concrete’s concrete,” and that “rebar’s still rebar.”

Times are changing

Smith says things in construction have changed a great deal since he first started, and to him it isn’t just the advent of new technologies or advances in technique as the real indicators of how present-day construction differs from the past.

“I think in the late ‘60s and into the ‘70s, there was a whole lot less emphasis placed on impact to the community and impact to the environment,” he says. “We have basically put ourselves into a new position where you can’t just go do your project the way you want and not work with the local communities.”

Smith notes that a Metro Community Relations team is on the job 24/7 to respond to community concerns and works to mitigate impact on the community from its construction activities.

And as for his experience in the private sector versus his work now at Metro, Smith boiled that down to a single point, too.



Metro Senior Construction Manager Fred Smith

“As far as exposure, I think working at Metro has given me a whole new insight into what civil engineering and working on public projects is like. It’s a much different environment than when you’re working for a mining company or for a development company,” he says. “You have a lot more interface with third-party agencies — Metro does — than you would ever see anywhere else in the industry.”

Emphasis on contractor relations

But for Smith, changes haven’t only been made in the past. He said the Eastside Extension management has been shaped to meet the needs of the project — that more emphasis has been placed on contractor relations.

“We’ve set up a field office out here that houses both the consultant staff and Metro employees. We’ve put together a team that’s integrated,” he says. “What we tried to do is bring the resources to the field, work directly with the contractor on a more personal basis, and we have tried to commit to the contractor that if he’s not successful, we’re not successful.”

The community, too, has been something that the project managers have been careful to listen to during this effort.

“We’ve taken on a different approach on this project here than we have in the past. Metro is striving hard to change its image, to become more aware of the community and our impact to their lives,” he says.