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Public television personality Huell Howser joins Metro cast members and David Zaitz Photography studio crew on the set of a photo shoot for new Rideshare campaign. In car: Huell Howser, Liz Armijo-Holbrook, Arthur Mason and Helen Valenzuela. From left: Photographer David Zaitz, Michael Lejeune, stylist Debra Day, Anne Karna, David Sutton, producer Mark Harrelson, videographer Vincente Ybarra, production assistant Meagan Szasz, make-up artist Mae Hess, and production assistants Shannon Eckberg and Doug Ewing. Photo courtesy of David Zaitz Photography.

Public TV's Huell Howser to Launch Metro Rideshare Campaign

- Popular host of "California's Gold" TV program will be agency's spokesman on the air, in print and online.
- 9th Annual Diamond awards recognize Southland employers who run successful rideshare programs.

By GAYLE ANDERSON

(May 22, 2007) Southern California is going to be hearing a lot more about the alternative solution to rising gas prices and traffic snarls starting Wednesday, when public television personality Huell Howser steps up to the podium at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel to hand out "Diamond Awards" to employers in Ventura and Los Angeles counties who run successful rideshare programs for their work force.

The Diamond Awards program recognizes employers for outstanding achievement in developing and implementing innovative and successful rideshare programs that encourage employees to "share the ride" to work.

Criteria include providing employees with commuter options to reduce congestion, pollution and expense of auto travel, and subsidizing vanpools and free transit passes.

The 9th Annual Diamond Awards will begin a two-year campaign for Howser and Metro Commute Services, in which the host of "California Gold," "Visiting" and "Downtown" will take on the varied concepts of ridesharing and sell it back to commuters sweetened with his unique style and familiar Tennessee drawl.

Metro Commute Services director David Sutton mined some "California Gold" of his own when he invited Howser to host the 7th annual rideshare awards two years ago. Although the TV host declined because of a scheduling conflict, the invitation set the wheels in motion.

"People like me don't really know what rideshare is," the TV host told Sutton after discovering that rideshare includes a variety of alternative means to avoiding traffic other than carpooling, such as telecommuting, riding a bike to work, taking public transportation, and vanpooling.

Howser offered to be spokesman

An environmentalist who tracks innovative means to reducing pollution, congestion and the like, Howser offered to be the spokesman for a Metro-based campaign to discover, then advance the merits of rideshare programs.

He'll be lending his persona to rideshare ads, webcasts, podcasts and events – plus taking a look at commute options in Southern California as part of his popular television shows.

"We believe that Mr. Howser's unique persona and appeal will certainly demystify participation in rideshare programs," said Sutton. "He has a unique way of talking to people who actually rideshare and getting them to tell us why they do what they do and how they do it."

The campaign will promote rideshare programs and also support Howser's alignment with the greening of California.

Sutton said the campaign will cover rideshare programs in five counties. Metro's partners in the effort include Ventura, Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange counties.

"We know that thousands of people cross county lines to get to work every day," said Sutton. "We want to help them get there more economically, more environmentally responsible and, yes, more conveniently."

With gas prices going up and traffic getting worse, there's no better time to get this message out," said Sutton.

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