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Fresh from morning donuts, Mike Cannell (center) general manager for Rail Operations, joins David Wilson (left), train operator, and David Reyes, train operator, at the Gold Line's Sierra Madre Villa station. Moments later Cannell rode the Gold Line to Gateway.



Photo by Ned Racine

## Mike Cannell Brings Varied Rail Experience to Metro Rail Operations

- Post-9-11 assignment anticipated terror attack in Chicago subway

By NED RACINE

(Dec. 19, 2007) Mike Cannell says his new job as general manager for Rail Operations "is the most challenging job I've every had." That's quite a statement given the variety of Cannell's transit experience.

One of those jobs had national significance. After the September 2001 terror attacks, the Federal Transit Administration chose Cannell to lead three teams composed of bomb experts, chemical engineers, and intelligent experts. Their task was to gauge the vulnerability of United States transit infrastructure to further attacks.

As a sign of his task's importance, Cannell reported directly to the deputy administrator of the Federal Transit Administration, where many of his recommendations were immediately implemented. Some remain classified.

Cannell's teams divided the United States into three geographic sections with Cannell visiting a third of all the sites. "They were fascinating assessments. I got to go down in the tunnels—way down deep—where no one ever goes."

Although Cannell found vulnerabilities in the Boston and New York

systems, he was stunned by what happened following his inspection of the Chicago subway system.

**Mysterious Rooms**

In the Chicago subway, "I noticed that between stations you have these long tunnels underground; and there are doors everywhere," he recalls. "There were rooms that no one had inventoried."

Cannell wondered if those rooms could be used to attack transit riders. In his exit interview in March 2002, he proposed the following scenario: a terrorist leaves a chemical agent in an open room and uses the suction of a passing train to spread the poison through Chicago's system.

Three days later an off-duty police officer saw a man and a teenager emerging from one of those underground rooms. In that room, a man known as "Doctor Chaos" had released a poison, hoping the momentum of the train would spread it.

"On Monday, I go back to do my assessment for [Chicago] Metro," he said, "and all the federal agents who had heard my [scenario] say, 'How the hell did you know?' "

The Chicago experience affected Cannell deeply. "It's helped me to see things differently in two regards: what are our challenges against terrorists and how vulnerable we are."

Cannell, who took his new position in early August, began working on rail at the age of 26, starting as a train agent for the San Diego Arizona Eastern Railway. After working on the San Diego Trolley from 1981 to 1988—where he eventually designed computer programs for train scheduling, timekeeping, and fare collection.

For the St. Louis light rail construction authority he managed engineering for train signals, traction power substations and the Overhead Contact System, as well as rail vehicle procurement. When the system was complete, he was picked to run it.

**Helped Build Salt Lake City Light Rail**

He also worked on a variety of engineering and management tasks for the Salt Lake City light rail system, where he worked with Rick Thorpe, now chief executive officer of the Exposition Metro Line Construction Authority.

Immediately before taking his new position, Cannell was responsible for managing the environmental clearance process of the Gold Line Foothill Extension project.

No stranger to Metro, Cannell helped create the first activation plan for the Blue and Red lines in 1988. From 2001 to 2005, he worked with the Metro Gold Line Construction Authority (Phase I), where he was responsible for taking the 13.5-mile project from construction to operations.

Now he has filled about every role in transit: planning, engineering, construction, operations.

"People have used me to audit the efficiency of operations [of transit systems] around the world: Atlanta, BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit], even Los Angeles." His overseas work included a light rail project in London.

Within weeks of his arrival in Rail Operations, Cannell faced a mile of collapsed catenary wire and two Gold Line collisions on Marmion Way.

"When you have all these things happen, you see things quicker because they expose the weaknesses of a system," he said. "In a sense that is a good thing as it allows for fast corrections."

**Nursing an Aging Rail System**

Cannell sees his biggest challenges as nursing an aging rail system, developing practices to maintain that system and gearing up for completion of two new light rail lines over the next few years. Many Metro rail vehicles, he points out, have a suggested service life of 15 years. They now average 17. "Most all the cars need mid-life rehabilitation."

To address the rail car "mid-life crisis," Cannell wants maintenance to be less reactive. He has hired a consultant to estimate what rehabilitating the Blue Line and Red Line cars would require.

Carol, his wife of 34 years calls from their home in Orlando, Florida—where she is caring for her mother—and advises Cannell to tackle one thing at a time. He insists that in his position that is not always possible.

In the midst of his competing priorities, Cannell takes considerable hope from the growth in Metro's rail ridership since he helped activate the Blue Line in 1988. He recalls the line originally carried 19,000 riders daily. Now Metro Rail carries 75,000 riders each day.

Cannell has already improved service by adding greater frequency of service and more reliable schedules on Metro Gold Line. He hopes to soon have a body and paint shop facility for the stainless steel train cars which will carry riders on the Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension.

Why is a professional who could easily retire living in a one-bedroom apartment in Azusa, far from his wife and two grown children, worrying about whether the Wayside Systems Facilities teams are properly supported.

"Just doing the right thing—pure and simple," Cannell says. "I'm not here trying to make a name for myself."