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Metro Embraces New – Certifiably Safer – Safety Vests

By JIMMY STROUP

(March 27, 2008) The newly-designed Metro safety vests have appeared at the divisions and are now available to keep the wearer highly visible. And very yellow.

The new vests have been created in two designs and two materials: sleeveless and sleeved, fabric and mesh. The “general duty” vests are the more common, sleeveless model that fit like the old design and are to be worn by the bus and rail operators, mechanics and service attendants.



New and old safety vests are set here against a Metro Local bus. The new vest (sported by Anne Karna, senior marketing and communications officer) stands out against the coach. The older model vest provides less contrast against the orange of the bus.

Photos and composition by Jimmy Stroup

The “high hazard” model is sleeved (resembling a T-shirt) and is meant to be worn by tow truck drivers, field technicians, signals crews, the Freeway Service Patrol and accident investigators who are working at off-property sites.

The mesh model is meant to be lighter-weight and cooler for the hotter areas in Metro’s system (such as East Valley Division 15 or San Gabriel Valley Division 9 on summer days).

The road to the new vests began in 2003 when the contract for the old vests expired. Pat Chism, senior safety specialist, headed up the new contract bidding project and said they received a surprise.

Not your father’s safety vest

“We did some investigation and found out that the Feds, for the first time, were regulating safety vests,” he said. “It had never been a regulated item before, like shoes, hardhats or goggles. Because of a rash of fatalities at the time with roadside workers, the government decided it needed to be regulated.”

The government adopted the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) guidelines on vests, and gave manufacturers until 2006 to comply. And though complying with Federal regulation wasn't very challenging, working around Metro's specific challenges was.

"The vests needed to change from orange to yellow when [Metro] changed the bus colors," Chism said. "The criteria we adopted said the vests had to 'highly contrast' with your most prominent hazard.

"The idea is that when you're using it on the street, the vest is supposed to present a highly contrastable visibility with whatever you're standing next to, and usually that's a bus," he continued. "And now that a lot of the buses are orange or red, the old vest becomes a problem."

Designed to fit the whole agency

Corporate Safety worked with Operations and Maintenance to incorporate improvements they'd like to see made in the vest. The new vest – with its multiple pockets, Velcro pocket seals, pen slots and Metro badge/business card see-through holder – are all reflections of the input.

"We queried everyone in Rail, Construction and Bus Operations and asked them, 'What do you want in a vest?'" Chism said. "The old vest had inside pockets, but mechanics hated that because they'd reach in with a greasy hand and get everything dirty. A pretty universal request was pockets on the outside."

This redesign also standardizes vests within the agency. The Metro Rail vests, for example, have traditionally differed from the Metro Bus vests.

The standardization will also cut costs for the production of the vests. The older vests cost up to \$34 each. The new vests, ordered in bulk, are only \$26 each for the fabric version and \$28 each for the mesh, about a 25 percent reduction.

Since going to the new model, Metro has purchased 14,713 vests at a total expense of just under \$400,000.

Except for jobs requiring the "high hazard" vest, the old vests are to be swapped for the new when the original is no longer serviceable. If your vest is worn or damaged, you can have it replaced with a new model vest. "High hazard" vest wearers have already been issued the replacement vests.