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Metro Offers Tomorrow's Leaders a Peak at Its Operations and Challenges

By Ned Racine, Editor

(May 21, 2008) Metro offered a peak at its operations and challenges to tomorrow's leaders, May 20, as it hosted 17 current and future members of the San Fernando Valley Leadership Institute—including several Metro employees.

With a goal of identifying, educating and preparing future public and private sector leaders, the Valley Leadership Institute introduces its participants to a variety of private, non-profit and governmental organizations. Participants visit environmental, justice, media and—yesterday—transportation agencies.

Shawn Lowe, Administration and Financial Services manager, found her nine-month commitment to the San Fernando Valley Leadership Institute “a great experience.

“It was a great opportunity to be introduced to so many agencies in LA County,” Lowe said. “I learned so much. You learn how agencies work together.” She also took away an understanding how organizations could work together to make LA County a better place to live.

She was also struck by the thread uniting the leaders she met through the institute. “What they do is create good.”

Lowe and Rachel Bird, assistant manager transportation for Manpower, Systems & Support, were this year's Metro participants. Marion Colston, director, strategic organizational planning, sits on the institute's board, as does Maria Reynolds, West Valley Division 8 transportation manager.

Following rides on the Metro Orange, Red and Blue lines, members of the institute's current nine-month program heard Carolyn Flowers, chief operations officer and a former member of the institute, offer an overview of Metro's contribution to Los Angeles County and the region.

Noting Metro's extensive bus system and growing light rail and Metro Rapid system, Flowers stressed the agency's goal of offering safe, reliable and quality service to attract more discretionary riders.

Flowers message was particularly appropriate. Besides its two Metro employees, none of this year's program participants had ever taken public transportation.

Flowers asked the institute's participants to look at Metro's services as an integral part of Los Angeles County's economy and remember that “Public Transportation does work in this city and does present a viable option to the population.” She also pointed to Metro's role in reducing the County's carbon footprint.

Looking toward Metro's future, Helen Ortiz-Gilstrap, communications manager, presented the Imagine campaign video and asked her audience to imagine the benefits of an expanded Metro System and elaborated on Metro's need for more funding to make these solutions possible.

Explaining Metro's commitment to transit oriented development, Roger Moliere, Chief of Real Property Management & Development, described Metro's vision of developing residential and retail properties around Metro stations in hope of increasing transit ridership and reducing the short trips that create so much congestion—40 percent of the trips in Los Angeles County are two miles or less. Moliere also noted that Metro was looking at more transit oriented development in the San Fernando Valley.

Terry Matsumoto, chief financial officer, detailed fiscal considerations confronting public transit, informing his audience that passenger fares cover only approximately 27 to 28 percent of the operating cost of the Metro System. After briefly explaining the source of Metro funding, he reminded the participants that "We have very desperate transportation needs."

With all the experiences Lowe has been exposed to through the institute, perhaps the most important thing she gained was a new view of herself. "I never thought of myself as a leader, but [the institute] would like us to become a boardmember of one of the groups you visit. This has inspired me to go out and make the community part of my family."

"Whatever I end up doing, I'll make Metro a part of that," said Lowe, who works with her teenaged son and his friends to use public transportation.