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Surrounded by video screens, Doug Middleton, newly appointed Director of Operations Training and Improvement, is at home in the OCI bus simulator.

Photo by Ned Racine

The What, Where and How: A Look at Operations Central Instruction

By JIMMY STROUP

(July 2, 2008) At the end of a very long hallway is an office door with a sign that reads "Please Use Other Door." But the owner of that door, the newly appointed head of Central Instruction (OCI) Doug Middleton, isn't all that serious about the sign being followed.

"I know what it says, but you can use it," he said. "I guess I should get people to walk around, but if it's easier for them to come through here, so be it."

This is the kind of approachable attitude Middleton has maintained since he first came to Metro in 2006 as transportation manager at San Gabriel Valley Division 9.

Middleton's new domain includes classrooms to teach operators and maintainers how to be operators and maintainers. Here the majority of new training occurs.

How much training? State regulations require a minimum of 15 hours of classroom instruction and 20 hours of bus operation for certification to drive a coach commercially.

Training operators on LA

"We blow those requirements out of the water," Middleton said. "Our training is 80 hours in class and approximately 30 hours behind the wheel. There are the state requirements for training, but then we have to train them on the big city: on L.A.

"OCI also trains potential operators on customer service requirements the

agency needs to maintain...they're learning all of that here at OCI," Middleton said.

New operator classes start every two weeks and generally contain 30 students. The classes run six weeks: a month in the classroom and two weeks of training in the OCI parking lot and on the streets.

OCI trains an average of 600 operators each year – a number Middleton said just keeps up with attrition from retirements and general staff losses.

Instructors at OCI are fully licensed by both state and federal authorities, so Metro's training program allows the operators to receive their Department of Motor Vehicles licenses internally.

"DMV lets us conduct our own testing for commercial driver's licenses," Middleton said. "All the supervisors and managers at OCI are certified by the DMV as licensors. We need that to save time, but also so we can make sure that the operators are qualified to our higher standards."

Improving the well-oiled machine

His new job started on May 27, but the ins and outs of Operations Central Instruction are something he's no stranger to.

"My background is in training," he said. "When I was at the [Orange County Transportation Authority], I was in instruction for eight years. Training here is like it was there – only bigger. The regulations are the same, the skills are the same. It's all very familiar to me."

Middleton said that the importance of OCI to the agency means it was a well-oiled machine when he took over the reins last month.

"I was pleased with the training the operators were getting when I was managing at the division, so I was encouraged by my experiences as a user of their product, so to speak," Middleton said. "But just because something isn't broken doesn't mean it can't be improved."

Middleton has plans for OCI's future.

Echoing the sentiments of transportation managers across the agency, he's investigating a standardized training process for transit operations supervisors.

Additionally, he's developing an experimental satellite training center in El Monte so operators save the trip downtown to the Metro Support Services Center (formerly RRC) to get their refresher training courses.

"It's a convenience factor for the division and for the employees," Middleton said. "With gas getting up there, this saves everyone a little money, too. If it works out, I hope to move training centers to the extreme western and southern areas of Los Angeles."

Middleton also plans to go through the training course himself, though he's a fully-qualified instructor already. He hopes to pick up on little areas where efficiency can save time and money in Metro's training enterprise.

"I know it's working well already," he said. "I just want to go through to see exactly what we do and how we do it – to make sure we're getting the best bang for the buck."

