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West Hollywood Division Mechanic Maurice Strong turns off the master cutoff switch that connects the coach's systems to the batteries. *Photo by Ned Racine*

Division 7 Mechanic Throws a Switch To Save Dollars and Time

- Battery drain reduced with simple procedure

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Aug. 5, 2008) David Palm, Division 7 West Hollywood maintenance manager, had a problem; Maurice Strong, a mechanic "A," had a solution. Now more buses are hitting the streets on time throughout the agency.

First, the problem.

"Prior to the day we started [using Maurice's idea], we probably averaged about 32 no-starts per week," Palm said. "We immediately went down to ... about three a week."

The problem was that some electronic systems on the coach drained the battery, even when the bus was supposedly turned off. For example, the fare box and Digital Video Recorder system are two systems designed to turn themselves off after 20 minutes and sometimes don't. (The fire suppression system remains on at all times.)

A light left on accidentally would also drain the battery over night, even in older coaches with fewer electronic systems. The majority of dead batteries occurred on Monday because the buses had been sitting idle since Saturday.

The drained batteries also caused some buses to leave late, because

operators only had 13 minutes to inspect their buses and begin rolling. Replacing or charging a battery threw off operators' schedules and reduced the number of buses Division 7 could put on the road.

And there was also the cost of the batteries. Each one cost almost \$75. "We've been spending oodles and oodles and oodles on batteries," Palm explained.

With five fare box and electronic communications technicians available, Palm does not have the staff to verify if the electronic systems on 244 parked coaches are asleep.

While troubleshooting another problem with Strong, Palm brought up the battery discharge problem. Palm compared the battery to a bank account. The electronic systems were making too many demands—too many withdrawals—on the bank account, the battery.

Fortunately, Maurice Strong had a solution.

"[Palm] mentioned to me that he needed to solve this battery problem," recalls Strong, who has worked at Metro and Division 7 for 10 years. "Everybody else's idea was to use a bigger and better battery. I told him, 'Why don't you just close the bank? Stop [the electronics] from making a withdrawal.' "

Strong proposed flipping off the master cutoff switch connecting the coach's systems to the batteries. In essence, when the switch is flipped, the road to the bank is closed. Then it doesn't matter if an operator leaves a light on or an electronic system forgets to shut itself down.

An added benefit to Strong's idea is its simplicity. Mechanics can flip the switch in less than a minute, as they have done since July 24.

And Strong's solution works on buses throughout the agency, conserving batteries without a negative effect on the bus.

Metro's Vehicle Technology group is researching long-term solutions to the battery drain issue. Division 18 is testing a new alternator with more battery charging power, and Division 3 has begun using a more sophisticated battery.

Strong expects his fellow mechanics will rib him about causing them more work in throwing the master cutoff switch. He doesn't seem to mind.

"It was a major issue that needed to be solved," he said.