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^CLICK 'PLAY' and 'STOP' TO VIEW TRT 1:59 ADJUST sound 'SLIDER' FOR SOUND^

Video: Barbara Burns, manager of Transit Education Programs, introduces safety robots to be used in schools and at community events to help get the rail safety message out to the public. Community Relations coordinators Jacqueline Martinez and Jennifer Arndt take the P2000 and Breda car robots out for a spin.

Video by Gayle Anderson

Move Over R2-D2, The Metro Robots Are Here

- Transit Education Programs Teach Children About Rail Safety

By Laura Kloth
Staff Writer

(Sept. 10, 2009) Experts say that if you're slightly animated and maintain good eye contact, you'll draw more attention and keep your audience interested.

If this is true, Metro's two newly purchased, cute and portable safety robots will probably do very well as Metro's Community Relations department uses them to teach children and adults about rail safety at schools and at Metro safety fairs and events.

The eye-blinking robots were delivered this week and will debut at Monte Vista Elementary School on Sept. 21.

According to Community Relations Manager Barbara Burns, the decision to purchase the two robots - which resemble a P-2000 and a Breda rail car - after one was spotted in action at an APTA conference.

Burns used a prototype that resembles a bus at the Gold Line Extension Safety Fair in May and it turned out to be a big hit.

"The robots speak to the kids. They are about 3-feet high, and 3-feet long. The children love them and the adults love them too," Burns said indicating the pair have not yet been named.

'Awe'-some reactions

The robots cost about \$10,000 a piece and were purchased from Utah-based Robotronics, a 26-year old company best known for creating *McGruff*, the crime-fighting hound.

Metro's newest hires are able to blink their eyes, move forward, backward and sideways, and talk in a childlike high-pitched voice controlled by a human via remote. They will also be programmed to authenticate Metro's distinctive train whistle.



'Handlers' Jackie Martinez, left, and Jennifer Arndt keep the portable, lovable robots on track.

Community Relations Coordinator Jacqueline Martinez, who has become an expert robot handler, says the best part about her job is watching reactions from children who have no idea she's controlling the robot.

"This one actually has a microphone so when the kids are talking, I can hear them and answer their questions. I can have a whole conversation with them without being noticed," she said. "We did the event for the [Gold Line Extension] safety fair, and I was telling people, 'Oh I like your shirt, nice purple shirt,' and their response would be, 'Oh my, the robot knows. He can see me.'"

"We actually had to get security for it because there were so many people approaching it. The kids wanted to hug it. The adults wanted to hug it as well and take pictures with it," she said.

CEO Art
Leahy got
on board

with the Safety Robots after an impromptu 'meet and greet' in the 3rd floor lobby on Thursday.



Burns said the new additions will become a good tool to keep students focused on safety.

"We're always trying to keep our program fresh since we train the schools around our rail lines every year. We think the robots will be a big surprise for the students," Burns said.

Real illusions

Floyd Tippetts, a Robotronics sales representative, says the robots are saving lives because children remember what they learn.

"The thing that works the best is the illusion that it is real. It listens and it hears, and then you could respond back," he said.

Tippetts says the company has some 7000 robots across the world teaching children about fire, street, train, school bus and boating safety, as well as crime prevention. There's even a new character going to Greece aptly named Curby who will teach children about recycling.

"As we're moving toward fewer cars on the road, you've got new avenues to teach safety," Tippetts said, "It just gives them an avenue to be taught in a fun type of way."