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Metro execs get behind the wheel for CEO Art Leahy's crash course in Operations. All cones survived.

Photos by Luis Inzunza

Slide show: Use 'back' and 'next' buttons to view

Metro’s Executives Get a Chance at the Wheel

- CEO Art Leahy shares bus operating experience with staff

By Laura Kloth
Staff Writer

(Oct. 15, 2009) Metro’s executive staff put aside their typical duties to get a little cross-training exercise this week with the opportunity to pilot a 45-foot Metro training bus at the request of their boss, Metro CEO Art Leahy.

“The important thing today is to understand and have some sense of what bus operators go through and what experiences they have,” said Leahy as he prepped his team at the 410 Center Street training lot.

“When you see them [operators] in the headquarters building, or if you go out to the division, they believe for the most part that we don’t have the slightest idea what goes on in their life. And you know what, they’re right, we don’t. But having some respect for the task they undertake is appropriate,” he said.

Leahy began his career as a bus operator some 38 years ago and has made it a point throughout his supervisory career to have staff experience actually driving a bus, said Special Assistant to the CEO Ron Schwartz.

“Thirty years ago, he made me drive one,” Schwartz said laughing and

wondering if it was really an “exercise in humility.”

When he was at the helm of the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), Leahy requested that that agency’s board members have the same experience, said Doug Middleton, Director Operations Central Instruction and Improvement, who worked under Leahy then.



But are they ready for extra board assignments? Only Instructor Vince Wilkes, at left, knows for sure.

Despite Tuesday’s rain and slick course conditions, the staff determined to stay focused as each took their turn maneuvering the 22,000 pound bus around the mini-training course.

“It [the bus] has a lot of power,” said Vince Wilkes, Transit Operations Supervisor - Instruction. “I call this bus Shamu with a steering wheel.”

Chief Operations Officer Carolyn Flowers raised her hand to go first and, although she’d already sat in the drivers’ seat at the recent Bus Rodeo, admitted being somewhat apprehensive, having dreamt about what sequence of buttons to push.

The Rodeo experience was a little more trying with the people and obstacles around it, Flowers said, “But I was worried about hitting other people’s equipment because this is like you’re driving a half a million dollar piece of equipment. I could take out millions of dollars around here just in one little error.”

After it was over, Flowers smiled and took a seat after getting a round of congratulatory applause.

“I’m thrilled to have had this opportunity, but you understand how complicated the job of a bus operator is to have to use one foot to depress the blinkers, and the other foot covering your brake, and having to make sure that you get your acceleration correct, and that you’re not jerking,” she said. “And then to look at your mirrors and then to know that you have passengers that you could affect.”

Chief Communications Officer Matt Raymond confidently looped around the obstacles several times, but, at one point, wondered if he had flattened a cone.

“Smooth, man,” Raymond gestured as he took his seat.

“The hardest thing is the perspective of the vehicle. These vehicles are really nice. Everything’s power, the brakes, the steering, so it’s just

figuring out where you are relative to what's around you," he said, indicating that L.A. traffic was his only previous training.

After Raymond's run, Rail General Manager Mike Cannell turned to his peers and proudly indicated, "I only killed one cone."

Leahy finished the day by taking his passengers around a few times going a bit faster than they had after commenting on the bus' impressive array of capabilities.

"When I started," he said. "We didn't even have a radio."

Others who took the challenge on Tuesday included: Chief Auditor Ruthe Holden, Chief Planning Officer Carol Inge, Chief Financial Officer Terry Matsumoto, Government Relations Officer Michael Turner, Chief Administrative Services Officer Lonnie Mitchell, Chief Real Property Management & Development Roger Moliere, Administrative Director Patricia Soto, Board Secretary Michele Jackson, Executive Officer-Administration Don Ott and Deputy Chief Capital Management Officer K.N. Murthy.