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The Metro Rail Safety Ambassadors help residents navigate tricky spots on the line, and run interference for law enforcement working to discourage pedestrians from jaywalking. Community Relations Manager Barbara Burns, center, coordinates the effort. Next to the left is organizer Carlos Valdez, Sr. Community Relations Officer. *Photos: Gayle Anderson*

## Metro Rail Safety Ambassadors Deliver the Safety Message to Eastside Community

- One by one: [Who is where](#)

By Gayle Anderson

(Nov. 13, 2009) The Veteran's Day holiday proved to be the calm before the storm for teams of Metro Safety Ambassadors staking out the six-mile alignment before the Sunday's public grand opening of the Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension.

"It's very quiet," said Ambassador Yandell "Sunny" Lister, "Everybody is obeying the law and paying attention to the lights."

Along First Street and Third Street to Atlantic Boulevard, neighborhoods in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles appeared deserted.

Except for pockets of Metro crews in hard hats and safety vests installing new traffic signs, there was hardly a sign of the approaching storm of trains, officials, exuberant riders, pedestrians and traffic gathering on the horizon for the landmark event.

But rain or shine, the stout-hearted Metro Rail Safety Ambassadors, who deliver Metro's rail safety message to hundreds of community members, expect the front line on safety to hold when the long-awaited light rail line opens.



Ambassadors Sunny Lister and Ronnie Scott at East L.A. Civic Center Station.

Lister is one of 24 Ambassadors working in shifts from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the weekends. The number of safety ambassadors doubled this month from the original 12 who began one-on-one rail safety lessons in the spring.

Under the direction of Community Relations Manager Barbara Burns, the ambassadors conduct a relentless one-on-one campaign for safety around the Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension.

The safety ambassadors help residents navigate tricky spots on the line, and run interference for law enforcement working to discourage pedestrians from jaywalking.

"Metro wants the public to have a safe experience with light rail," said Metro CEO Art Leahy. "A train with cars that weigh more than 100,000 pounds can't stop on a dime so motorists and pedestrians must pay attention. The ambassadors are the face of Metro. They're teaching people how to watch for trains, observe the warning lights and signage and act responsibly around the trains."

Leahy said the agency has gone to great lengths to ensure safety. A \$4.5 million investment in additional safety enhancements was approved by the Board in October. The new funding paid for additional safety ambassadors and will also pay for nearly two miles of a 4 ft. centerline fence to be built down the entire alignment, in addition to more signals, and more traffic signs.

Every trained safety ambassador is a retired Metro professional – a former train or bus operators or retired security officer.

The safety ambassadors must make sure that pedestrians learn the sounds of trains, look at the bells and whistles, learn how to cross the tracks properly in the crosswalks, and understand the speed of trains.

"People walking across the tracks were my biggest challenge," said Ambassador James Bernard, who attended the three-hour light rail safety course at seven that morning. "We get to them before they start walking across. We take them over and show them where the safety zone is, and they walk away saying 'thank you, thank you!'"

Ambassador-at-large Ronnie Scott was happy to see the new left-turn signal at the Mednik and Third Street location.

"Atlantic is not that bad but Woods Avenue to the west has five intersections going. That's a lot of skateboarders to keep track of," said Scott, shaking his head. "They're learning. When they see us, they pick up their skateboard and walk across the street like they're supposed to."

Ambassador Lorne Currie, who joined Metro in 1983 as a bus operator and helped open the first segment of the Metro Gold Line as a train operator, retired in 2007.

"Here's the challenge," said Currie, "There's a brand new rail system in your back yard and you don't know anything about it – how to cross it, how to drive with it, what direction to go."



From left:  
Kirk Davis,  
James  
Bernard,  
Ronnie Scott  
and Gregory  
Ferris confer  
at Indiana  
Station

### **Inform, witness, and report**

"The ambassadors are there seven days a week and are our contact in the field," said LASD Ret. Lt. George Grein, currently called back to duty as law enforcement liaison between Transit Security Bureau and Metro. "It's like a real-time Neighborhood Watch. Their weekly report informs the patrol staff and deputies on motorcycles on enforcement in areas identified with problems."

Since establishing a presence in May, Grein said the TSB has issued some 1,800 citations and more than 100 warnings to pedestrians and drivers in areas identified by the Safety Ambassadors.

As the Ambassadors advance to the front line, they are backed by a groundswell of safety support that began shortly after construction took root in 2007.

The comprehensive safety program canvassed the entire community, including training sessions at all 60 schools within a five-mile radius of the alignment, senior citizen centers and civic groups and organizations.

Additional safety training was conducted within the community in the summer, when the staff visited recreational centers, youth groups, staged 'brown bag' lunchtime training sessions at local hospitals, and conducted 10 safety training sessions at local libraries, which were advertised in newspapers.

New this month, an illustrated signage fold-out in five languages prevalent in the area -- English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese and Japanese -- is being distributed. The manual was inspired by Ambassadors who reported concerns that some drivers didn't recognize the international symbols used on traffic signs.

And when trains begin picking up passengers, rail cars will advertise safety basics from train-length ads attached to the exteriors.

In a report issued Oct. 6, an independent panel of rail transit safety experts concluded that the new Metro Gold Line to East Los Angeles has been designed and built to operate safely.

The panel suggested additional safety enhancements such as installing fencing in areas where frequent jaywalking is observed, installing raised buttons or rumble strips and reflective pavement markers so motor vehicles don't accidentally intrude on the trainway, reduce warning sign clutter, and work closely with law enforcement to strongly enforce the "Stop Here" and "Keep Clear" requirements.

In their final recommendation, the panel asked Metro "to continue the Ambassador program for several weeks beyond the start of revenue service."

But are the safety lessons sticking? The Ambassadors say yes. The community is definitely responding.

"I believe we made a difference so far. The signaling system makes it safer. Everybody is getting on board. The people are welcoming and friendly now," Lister said.

#### **METRO RAIL SAFETY AMBASSADORS**

**Ronald Autry**, Pico/Aliso \* **Michael Barnes**, 1st & Alameda \* **James Bernard**, 3rd & Rowan \* **Hilarie Berry**, Pico/Aliso \* **Gene Campbell**, 3rd & Mednik \* **Rogelio Chacon**, 1st & Indiana \* **Hugh Cooper**, Alameda & Temple \* **Lorne Currie**, 1st & Indiana \* **Kirk Davis**, 1st & Indiana \* **Henry Dixon**, El Mercado \* **Askia Faheem**, 3rd & Mednik \* **Gregory Ferris**, 1st & Indiana \* **Harold Fields**, 1st & Alameda \* **Cary Hogan**, 3rd & Rowan \* **Francis James**, 3rd & Rowan \* **Yandell "Sunny" Lister**, 3rd & Mednik \* **James McDuffie**, 3rd & Indiana \* **Bruce Montgomery**, Alameda & Temple \* **Sara Moore**, Pico/Aliso \* **Mike Moran**, El Mercado \* **Narciso Polanco**, El Mercado \* **Sheree Sanders**, Pico/Aliso \* **Ronnie Scott**, 3rd & Indiana \* **Walter Shelby**, 1st & Alameda



Now 24 strong, the Metro Rail Safety Ambassadors stake out the new six-mile alignment to conduct personal safety campaign with residents and visitors to East Los Angeles.

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