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511 team members Anne Karna, Ken Coleman and Mauro Arteaga are asking Metro employees to try 511 and provide feedback.

Employees invited to test drive 511

- **Check it out.** Online: [go511.com](#). By phone: **Call 511.**
- **Suggestions?** Bugs? Love it? Hate it? Tell us by sending the [feedback form](#) on the [Go511.com](#) website or just say 'feedback' on the phone
- **More:** Get the [FAQs](#)!

(March 18, 2010) In advance of the public launch of 511 – the on-demand phone and web service that provides real-time transportation information for the five-county region of Southern California – Metro employees are asked to take Go511.com on the road for one last test drive.

"We're asking Metro employees to call 511 or visit Go511.com to try

511 is coming! Advertising campaign to get commuter's ready for Go511.com includes web videos, web advertising, print ads and billboards, says campaign manager Robin

out the system and leave feedback," says Communications Manager Anne Karna.

O'Hara, senior communications officer in marketing.

"All the comments received will help us improve 511."

"We are looking for feedback on usability," said Project Manager Mauro Arteaga. "We are working closely with the contractor to iron out bugs before the program goes live."

Now in its third phase of beta testing, the response has been extremely helpful, said Arteaga. Feedback ranges from "great!" and "thank you!" to technical issues, such as questioning trip planner routes or a suggestion for a live person on the other end of the line.

"511 is a one-stop information shop for everything you need to know for a better commute, said Karna. "You can call 511 on your cell phone or visit the web site and get real-time, on-demand information on traffic, transit, and commuter services. 511 will either give you the info or transfer you to someone who will help."

(I took Anne's word for it but called 511 as soon as I was out of earshot. I asked for bicycle information for Glendale in the 'commuter services' mode and 511 offered to transfer me to the LA County Bicycle. After two bars of music, a real person named Sal answered the phone and asked my starting location. I broke down and admitted I was a fake caller. But still, Sal was willing to tell me what he would have said: "I would ask your destination then give you the best route," he said with a smile (I can tell!) I asked, quite seriously, "What if there's construction somewhere or an accident ahead?" No worries. Sal would give me a detour.)

511 is nothing like your father's traffic report. Three characteristics make it totally unique and thoroughly modern, said program manager Ken Coleman.

- It's on-demand: You don't have sit through a litany of



Dave Sotero of Media Relations tests the system on the web at go511.com and on his desk phone. It works both ways on his iPhone, below. Go to go511.com or dial 511 on a phone, any phone. (Reminder: Hands-free laws and cell phone charges apply)



Sneak Preview:

Two scenarios prove promising:

- 1.** You're about to depart for somewhere. Should you take the bus, rail, carpool or, worse, drive? So many traffic jams and not enough time? Now, you can hedge your congestion bets with a new tell-all traffic info service called 511. Just turn on your computer and go.
- 2.** Or, say you've already gone but something has clogged the freeway you're sitting on. Should you get off and find another route or go back home? Well, get in phone-safe mode (your hands-free device is handy or you pull over to the side of the road) and dial 511.

The first time you're allowed to wonder – will this be like talking to my bank's automated system? Will I have to text my question and punch in code numbers or wait to select from a long narrative list? No, no, and no. After the

freeways on the radio to get to your trouble spot.

- It's real-time: Meaning, up to the minute, now.
- It's voice-activated. Get on the phone and answer the questions to get to the point of your call.

nice cyber-voice welcomes you to GO511.com (beta), she'll ask if you want help with "transit, traffic or commuter services."

From then on, you just answer the questions. And you can get to the point fairly quickly. Stuck on a freeway? Say 'traffic' to get in the traffic mode, then the voice will ask you to name the freeway or 'traffic hot spot'. After the two of you pin it down, you'll get a traffic report on the situation you're in. Nice.

"From the traffic management perspective, 511 gives the user a sense of where the congestion is occurring and then provides the opportunity to get information on alternate routes, and alternate modes of transportation, said Coleman, who lives in Whittier and frequently checks in on freeway travel times when he has to drive to work at Metro Headquarters.

511 traveler information services are provided by the Los Angeles County Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (LA SAFE), in partnership with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, (Metro), Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), the Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC), the California Highway Patrol (CHP) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans).

Look familiar? The database is fed by RIITS, Caltrans, LADOT and the California Highway Patrol. And, the user-friendly program calls on metro.net's trip planner to provide transit information online and on the phone, making the trip planner the first-ever voice activated service available by phone.

LA SAFE is the contractor of this service, and, as such, the owner/operator/manager of go511.com on behalf of the tri-counties, said Coleman. "There is so much traffic in Los Angeles, including through-traffic from adjoining counties, that it's impossible to confine 511 service to Los Angeles County. It's got to be regional."

A topic of discussion making the rounds at agencies throughout the region since 2006, 511 found a home at Metro in 2008, when the Board awarded the contract to LA SAFE and stepped into provide leadership to reach the US DOT goal of a national program that ties in all travel information, including air, by September 2010.

With active programs in San Francisco and San Diego, the launch of Go511.com puts California among the 40 states that operate 511 programs.

At a time when traffic has reached its critical mass, bursting out of its roadmap confines, tearing travel time into shreds and mopping the freeways with remnants of leisure time and lost horizons, 511 is shining information on this huge, regional issue. By providing options, real-time information puts control back in the driver's seat.

In the long run, says Coleman, 511 will have an impact on traffic. "There will be change, the kind of change that comes with awareness. If we can get people out of their car into carpools and transit options by providing reliable, specific information that proves trustworthy and accurate, we're better able to entice someone to leave their car at home.

What's next?

- **Next Trip:** Currently, 511 recites the schedule for Metro buses but when is the bus is *really* coming? Next trip tells all.
- **Road works:** actual and planned road closures, for real.
- **511 en espanol:** In about one year from launch, the Spanish language interactive voice recognition system (IVR) will debut.

Currently, the beta testers are pumping out an average of 450 calls a day. "The recent storms sent the daily charts spiking to 1,000," said Arteaga.

But will the system hold up when the program goes live? Yes, says Coleman. "The 511 system is sized for a large metropolitan region like L.A. and it's scalable to drop in and out of ports in emergency mode." The program can handle 300 concurrent callers before a back-up system can pick up another 250 users all at the same time.

-- from Gayle Anderson