



NEWS

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METRO GREEN LINE TRAIN OPERATORS FEEL A SENSE OF HISTORY -- AND CAMARADERIE -- AS OPENING NEARS

Jesus Ruiz, who will be among MTA's first Metro Green Line train operators, fancies himself as something of a modern-day pioneer.

The Green Line represents the third MTA rail line he will have had a part in starting up in six years. Ruiz was at the controls of the first Blue Line trains in 1990; he also was one of the first Red Line operators when that system began in early 1993.

"It's like being a part of the space program," says Ruiz, a Huntington Beach resident. "More than 25 years ago, astronauts took their first steps on the moon. It was an exciting time. I think these three rail systems can be seen as the first three steps for the future of Los Angeles transportation. It's truly exciting to be a part of."

For Rialto resident Ricardo Miranda, switching from his Line 210 bus to Green Line trains was the fulfillment of a childhood dream. "I always wanted to drive a train as a child," he says. "I watched Santa Fe freight trains all the time as I was growing up." Miranda drove the Crenshaw Boulevard line for 19 years, but left quietly. "One lady gave me a card and wished me good luck. That was about it -- I just went off into the sunset."

The Green Line is scheduled to open for regular service later this summer. The third color to be added to MTA's growing rainbow of rail services will serve a 20-mile east-west route from the South Bay area to the city of Norwalk. Ruiz,

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Miranda and 35 others have spent the last several months learning about the intricacies of operating the passenger trains that will travel down the median of the Century Freeway (I-105).

"It was like going back to school, that's for sure," says south central Los Angeles resident Arnold Johnson, who spent 15 years as a bus operator and another 4½ years as a Transit Operations Supervisor before being tapped for Green Line service. "It was definitely no cakewalk. There is a lot of studying you have to do. The differences between buses and trains are substantial. We have to learn different signals, how to watch for grade crossings, how to approach stations at the correct speed. It requires your full attention, believe me."

All Green Line operators spend their first five weeks on the Blue Line in actual revenue service to get a feel for how passenger service really works. Once they are accustomed to the rails, the signaling system and other nuances of rail operation, they are put on Green Line trains for test runs.

The first group of Green Line operators has an advantage over future classes, points out Jess Guajardo, a Green Line operations supervisor.

"One of the key elements we are stressing during our training period is clear communication between operators and maintenance technicians," said Guajardo, a La Puente resident. "Our first group of operators has had time to watch closely how the trains are maintained and to ask questions about how they work. This will help them better describe any problems that may occur later."

Training does not end after the initial session, Guajardo says. All Green Line operators must recertify every year to make sure they keep up to speed on rules and troubleshooting skills. They also must regularly polish their bus driving skills, should they be called upon to operate buses in an emergency.

All the operators note a special bond that has formed among the Green Line's first trainees. "It's been born out of the absolute necessity for teamwork," Guajardo says. "We must be team players, because the schedule demands that we

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depend on each other. Bus schedules are more flexible; if one breaks down or is late, another can simply go around it. That can't happen on the Green Line. Trains must be six minutes apart."

Retirement beckons for Ruiz and Johnson, but both have resisted the temptation. "History is happening here, and I want to be a part of it," Ruiz says. "That's what keeps me coming back."

When Johnson took a train out for a test run recently, people all along the line stopped, looked and pointed. "I'm excited because they're excited," Johnson says. "I'm due to retire, too, but I may stay another few years."

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