



NEWS

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MTA'S MAN IN HOLLYWOOD

Pounding a beat door to door, meeting people, answering their calls late at night. It is not the kind of work that makes grist for headlines. It is the work that solves problems and gets things done. It's what's been happening in Hollywood ... behind the headlines. Where MTA and the community mix.

This is where MTA Public Affairs Officer Stephen Sawyer lives and works. Keeping track of noise levels in a construction area is a big concern for the community. So, to keep on top of the conditions, Sawyer moved into the neighborhood, to an apartment across from the LaBrea access shaft for construction on the Hollywood/Highland station. He then set up sound monitors on his balcony so he could check noise levels day and night.

"When construction activities are taking place 24 hours a day, it would be unrealistic to think you can respond to problems on a 9 to 5 basis," Sawyer says.

Sawyer is part of a team of public affairs officers at the MTA who liaison with the community. They are there on the street, talking to people, listening to them, finding ways to resolve the problems that are the inevitable result of a large construction project.

Sawyer's beat is Hollywood Boulevard, from Vine to Highland, and the hills above it where large boring machines are cutting tunnels through the Santa Monica Mountains.

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His presence in the neighborhood gives him a first party interest in how residents are affected by construction. When residents complained late one evening, he turned up at their doorstep to hear for himself. At 11:30 at night he was lying on their patio floor to check ground vibrations and noise levels.

"It's the unknown that bothers people," Sawyer says. "If they know exactly what is happening underneath them and what it should sound like, they are much more tolerant of the situation."

Sawyer has intervened when he thought things might be out of hand. He has been given the unusual authority by Construction to shut down work if the noise is unacceptable. "Sometimes it is not a question of what is technically acceptable. It's a matter of common sense," Sawyer says. "If it sounds loud, it is."

Most mornings, Sawyer is out walking Hollywood Boulevard, greeting the shopkeepers.

He knows them by name. Murray Kaplan at Vogue Discount, Ike Perlmutter at Hollywood Camera & Perfume, George Comboianu at Combo's Pizza, Raubi Sundher at the Hollywood Wax Museum...

The shopkeepers have had their share of problems during the heaviest load of subway construction work. But Steve Sawyer has been there to listen to their complaints and look for solutions. They have his telephone and pager numbers. He answers calls at all hours.

Sawyer works with people face to face. "People want to know what is happening," Sawyer says. "They want to know what to expect."

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"He is the man," Ike Perlmutter says of Sawyer. "When you have someone here in the field, talking to you, it means something. When Steve Sawyer makes a promise, he keeps his word."

Sawyer recently helped initiate an agreement with the community to allow for 24-hour construction work from March through June 15. It meant closing down two lanes of traffic during the day and eliminating the street parking that the merchants usually count on.

The MTA in turn provided parking validations at private lots and rent subsidies during that period, and Sawyer went door to door handing them out. A number of merchants opposed the agreement initially, including Perlmutter. But by June 14, the street was cleared.

"We did have some parking problems," Perlmutter says. "But eventually we accomplished what we wanted. And we hope for the better. Steve Sawyer helped a lot."

"We worked together, the merchants, elected officials, and the MTA," Sawyer says of negotiations. The agreement to allow day-time work helped keep the project on time and it saved the MTA an estimated \$3 million.

"But the most important thing about this situation was that it gave the MTA a chance to re-establish a working relationship with the merchants," Sawyer says. "We know it's noisy and dusty and there are problems, but we can work together."

The agreement with the merchants won an accolade in the City Council from Councilmember Jackie Goldberg, who cited Sawyer, MTA Executive Officer for Construction Charles Stark, and the independent mediator in the negotiations, Barbara Johnson.

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"Steve Sawyer is what's right in the MTA. He puts a human face on this agency. With his caring and creativity, he produced a win-win for Hollywood merchants and the MTA," Goldberg said.

Lately, Sawyer is checking water levels. As the tunneling moves through the Santa Monicas above Runyon Canyon, the MTA keeps a constant check on the water table. So far, with residents' help, some 35 springs and creek beds have been located in the area.

Sawyer works with the residents to keep track of the water levels and to supplement water sources in several locations in order to ensure normal conditions are maintained.

Sawyer has addressed impromptu meetings in residents' driveways to tell people how the construction is proceeding and how it affects them.

His method of operation remains straight forward in talking to people, residents and merchants.

"I tell people the truth. If I make a mistake, I apologize," Sawyer says. "I don't have barrels of money to give away. All I have is my credibility."

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