

**METRO SAN FERNANDO VALLEY SECTOR COUNCIL
AUGUST 16, 2006**

SUBJECT: CUSTOMER COMPLAINT COMPARISON

ACTION: RECEIVE AND FILE REPORT

BACKGROUND

At the Sector Council meeting held on July 5, 2006, members of the Council requested an expanded [report on Customer Complaints](#). Specifically, Council representatives wanted to know how the Sector compares to the other four Metro Bus sector operations, Metro as a whole, and to other regional and national operators. This report summarizes data taken from a variety of sources.

METHODOLOGY

Information was requested from available reports submitted to the governing bodies of operators that chose to respond to my request for information. Contacts were made to all members of the Bus Operations Sub-Committee for Metro and to a variety of national and other local properties as follows: Atlanta, Georgia (MARTA), Denver, Colorado, (RTD), Houston, Texas, New Jersey Transit (NJTransit), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (SEPTA), San Diego, California (SDT), St. Louis, Missouri (Bi-State), Riverside, California (RTA), and Washington, DC (WMATA). Requests were sent on July 17, 2006. To the extent necessary, reporting was converted to complaints per 100,000 boardings to make it similar to our reports. Few of the agencies contacted were able to respond to staff requests for information. To that extent, the comparisons are limited and because the sample is small, the properties reporting are presented as east coast, mid-west, and west coast.

DISCUSSION

Customer complaints are the most nettlesome issues for the division to deal with because we are dealing with behavioral, mechanical, and environmental concerns simultaneously. Most agencies contacted could not respond to our request. Three do not track complaints. Several sent reports or sample reports.

- Riverside Transit tracks 17 categories of complaints. In May they experienced 0.0238 complaints per 100,000 boardings.
- Culver City tracks by operator and had 39 complaints over a six-month period.
- An east coast and west coast large operator reported as follows:

Complaints per 100,000 Boardings

	FY05	FY06 Q1	FY06 Q2	FY06 Q3	FY06 Q4
East Coast Bus	13.10	11.85	11.80	9.70	12.00
West Coast Bus	15.76	13.29	10.60	11.30	10.11
MTA Metro Bus	3.54	3.13	3.10	2.74	2.43
SFV Sector Bus	4.39	4.11	3.74	2.59	2.52

Metro’s system-wide rate as well as that of the San Fernando Valley Sector is lower than both the East Coast and West Coast reporting operators. As noted above, the SFV rate over the past four fiscal years has also been significantly lower than a Mid-West Metro Bus Operator.

System/Sector	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06	June 2006
Metro System-wide	4.23	4.51	3.54	2.41	2.06
San Fernando Valley Sector	6.32	5.45	4.39	3.24	2.56
San Gabriel Valley Sector	3.57	3.80	2.95	2.18	1.88
Gateway Cities Sector	2.63	3.08	2.58	1.69	1.60
South Bay Sector	4.02	4.63	3.61	2.50	2.04
Westside Central Sector	4.84	5.30	4.10	2.53	2.22
Metro Rail	1.25	1.11	1.45	1.02	0.63
Mid-West MetroBus	17.00	10.00	9.00	8.50	n.a.

As reported at each of our Council meetings, the volume of complaints is decreasing for the MTA as a whole and in particular with the sector. However, the unprecedented heat experienced in the last two months has not only raised the temperatures of our passengers and operators but has also played havoc with electrical components on our equipment and in some major cases traffic signal systems which fail.

Customer disputes often arise from fare disagreements, language barriers to communication, or requests for information that the operator may not satisfy. Another class of complaints comes from alleged “No Shows” or “Pass-ups” while other complaints are “blind” because someone observes a behavior and alleges misconduct on the part of the operator. The latter behavior is often characterized as “unsafe driving behavior.” It is hard to follow-up on a specific concern in this arena unless a pattern of complaints emerge. Staff has also received complaints alleging on-board incidents from 1-2 months ago as well as complaints that an

operator provided a courtesy to another passenger causing them a slight delay. This neither negates nor belittles the complaints we receive, and staff researches each one.

Clearly, the San Fernando Valley Sector has the highest complaint rate of all of the MTA sectors per 100,000 boardings with Gateway Cities having the lowest rate. Clearly, the San Fernando Valley Sector has the highest complaint rate per 100,000 boardings of all of the sectors. But this is due, in large part, to demographics and service abnormalities.

Many bus routes in the San Fernando Valley sector have long headways (period between the departure of a bus and the arrival of a following bus.) Those headways may be as long as 45 minutes; whereas routes in the downtown area of Los Angeles, for example, have headways that are largely under 10 minutes. A bus which fails to arrive as scheduled is quickly followed by another line coach.

Conversely, the single most distinguishing characteristic of the San Fernando Valley services is that we operate more one-way route miles than any other sector but we do not have the service hours to continue to increase frequency. Simply stated, if a bus breaks down or runs late because of traffic, the wait for the following bus is longer than experienced by customers in other parts of our system. Given the constancy of the triple digit heat this summer, the shortage in manpower, and the structure of our services all have contributed to a higher rate of complaints as well as service delays for this sector.

Interestingly, and much to the credit of the San Fernando Valley Sector staff, an analysis of complaints related to operator behavior shows a somewhat different picture. Metro Customer Relations tracks the number of Operator Performance Related Complaints per 100 Operators.

- This indicator is comprised of complaints about Unsafe Operators, Operator Discourtesy, Pass-Ups, Operator Conduct, Accessible Service Pass-Ups and Accessible Service Behavior.
- San Fernando Valley Sector Operators generally rate around the system average. During the month of April 2006, the Sector had the second lowest rate of complaints in this category.

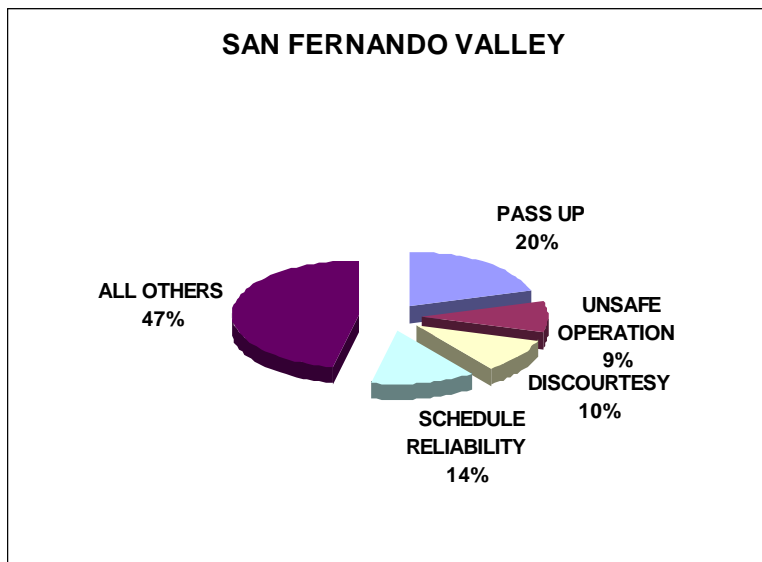
System/Sector	April '06	May ' 06	June '06
Metro System-wide	10.20	9.64	9.43
San Fernando Valley Sector	9.60	9.67	9.43
San Gabriel Valley Sector	11.70	8.62	8.31
Gateway Cities Sector	7.92	7.65	9.31
South Bay Sector	11.60	9.37	8.68
Westside Central Sector	10.60	11.82	11.87

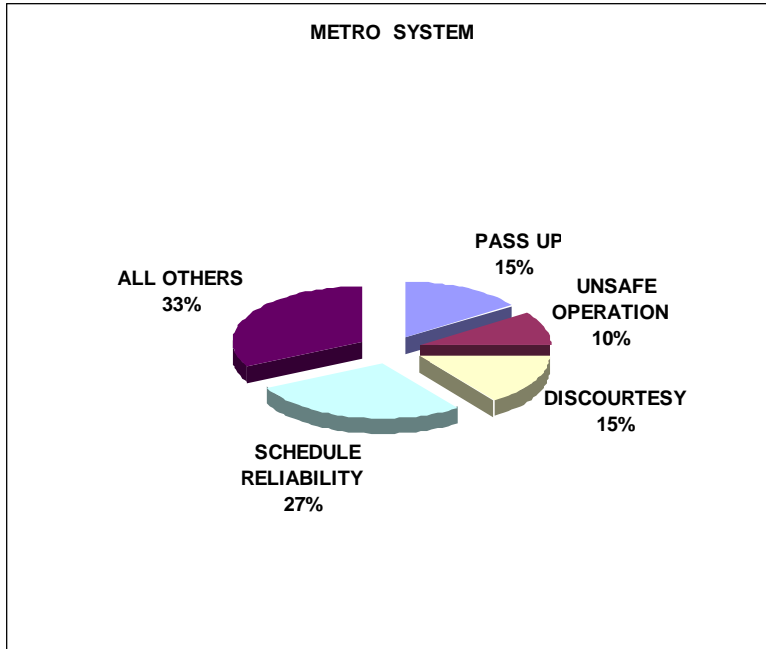
Source: Monthly Customer Input Reports

- For the months of May and June 2006, in the categories of complaints per 100 operators, the Sector is below or at the system average.

Based on the results presented above, customers in the SFV are more likely to complain about a wider variety of issues. However, when we are compared to the rates of complaints on an operator basis the results are consistent across all MTA bus sectors. In May and June, the Operator performance complaint categories actually show the San Fernando Valley as quite comparable to other sectors. Finally, in a year over year comparison, the San Fernando Valley Sector has reduced complaints by 51% from last year and the agency, as a whole, reduced complaints by 41% in the same period.

In June, as measured by Customer Relations, MTA recorded 926 total complaints. The San Fernando Valley Sector accounted for 148 of the total or 15.9%. Exhibit 1 below compares the San Fernando Valley complaints in major categories to the system as a whole.





Based on the above charts, in June, Pass-up complaints was the most significant issue category for the Valley. For the Metro system as a whole, Schedule Reliability at 27% of all complaints received was more significant. The SFV sector improved substantially in the June month concerning Operator Discourtesy complaints. Unsafe Operation was the same as system wide, and Schedule Reliability complaints were also reduced compared to the system as a whole. The “All other” category is much larger for the SFV than the system which means that nearly 50% of the complaints are for other than operator actions.

None of the above means that the Sector staff is pleased by the overall results. In prior reports given to the Council, comments have always focused on the concept that one complaint is too many. Nor do we offer excuses for them. Instead, staff has implemented a number of initiatives over the past year that has directly affected our complaint rates. These initiatives include the Operator Panel at Division 15, structured interviews with each operator, customer relations training, and the application of progressive discipline where warranted by an identified and continuing pattern of behavior. A new course is being developed for customer relations training for operators that are computer based. The new training curriculum presents situations to operators and assists them in making choices to help defuse potential complaint based situations.

Sector Response to Trends

The sector staff will continue to monitor services, respond to complaints and make adjustments in services. On August 2, 2006, we held a public hearing to begin the implementation of the Metro Connections program. One of the primary goals of the program is to increase the reliability of the service through route adjustments that shorten trip lengths and provide sufficient times for operators to recover from delays encountered on a day-to-day basis. In addition, under the new contract additional meal and rest times have been

incorporated into the agreement to further enhance the ability of the operator to both get a break as well as stay on time. Staff has argued that if service reliability can be improved and schedules are maintained then complaints will be further reduced.

Conclusion

San Fernando Valley sector staff is keenly aware of complaints as an issue for both management and operators alike. While not all recorded complaints are legitimate, each one is given the same weight, are investigated fully, and operators are contacted. Staff will be concentrating on improvements in service reliability and on-time performance through implementation of the Metro Connections program. The better able we are to deliver the service, the more likely complaints are going to decline. Lastly, new training programs for customer relations activities will also benefit our employees and will raise awareness of specific issues related to customer support and interaction.

Prepared by:

Gary S. Spivack,
Acting General Manager