



Metro Rail Customer Conference Report

By Numan Parada

Metro held a special Rail Customer Conference on Tuesday, October 24.

Gerald Francis opened the conference by expressing the mission of Metro Rail, which is to provide a “safe, clean and efficient system.” Rail operations experience “trials and tribulations” that are often not seen by passengers, Francis noted. To make sure that the system runs smoothly, numerous eyes watch the system regularly through their Rail Operations Center (ROC) to check on problems and perform infrastructure work in the evening to minimize disruptions.

Metro Rail brought in improvements in fiscal year 2006. Officials are particularly excited about the success of the prototype 2550 rail car, which is capable of operating on all three light rail lines (Blue, Green and Gold Lines). Metro Rail also completed improvements on the Gold Line, thereby reducing travel time to 29 minutes for local trains and 24 minutes for express trains. Ridership on the Gold Line is finally growing, with express trains gaining a following by passengers.

Bruce Shelburne, Service Development Manager, elaborated more details on these recent improvements. Metro Rail has expanded all of its Blue Line train sets to three cars. On the Gold Line, train schedules were shuffled in late October to accommodate local and express trains at combined 10-minute headways. For each 30 minutes of service, there are three local trains that arrive at intervals of 8, 8 and 14 minutes. A fourth express train comes during the 14-minute gap. Shelburne noted that Gold Line ridership continues to increase, bucking the trend where transit ridership usually declines after the summer.

Dave Kubicek, Deputy Executive Officer of Rail Fleet Services, elaborated on developments regarding rail cars. Kubicek said that a “host of consultants” were responsible for the design of the Gold Line cars and Metro wished to avoid that fate in the future. To that effect, the 2550 car is the first light rail car designed with Metro, for Metro. The car features touch-screen information where the car operator can diagnose 95% of problems. AnsaldoBreda, which manufactured the Red Line cars under the name Breda, will build the first 50 cars. Metro hopes to use these new cars on the future Eastside Gold Line and the Exposition Line. Also, as a testament to the growth of the Blue Line, the substations that provide its power are operating at capacity.

Aida Asuncion, Deputy Executive Officer of Rail Transit Engineering, offered highlights on improvements at the rail divisions. Division 11 (Blue Line) now features an expanded vehicle shop and a larger wash building. Division 20 (Red Line) will have a

new car wash facility currently in the design phase. Division 21 (Gold Line) has new storage tracks for train cars and will soon expand its maintenance facility. Division 22 (Green Line) features a new crossover track that aims to move train cars from the storage area to the maintenance shop. Metro Rail has also replaced its old SCADA (Supervisor Control and Data Acquisition) system with a new one that is compatible with all light rail lines, including the two new rail lines. The replacement included an upgrade of all Blue Line “Remote Thermal Units,” which feed data by fiber optic to the ROC. Asuncion expressed that the new SCADA will help Metro make changes when needed and with full control. About \$20 million has been budgeted for the Rail Capital Program in FY 07.

Francis closed the presentation with a reminder that customers must also be focused on safety, and suggested to keep a watchful eye out for disruptive or dangerous actions, such as a person standing too close to the edge of a platform. Metro is improving public outreach on safety, but customer cooperation is just as important, according to Francis.

Conference participants then asked questions regarding rail service.

Bart Reed, Transit Coalition Executive Director, brought up a point made by Metro Board member Zev Yaroslavsky that there are more crashes on the Blue Line than on the Orange Line busway and asked if this was accurate. Francis replied that accidents are rare on the Blue Line, considering the amount of service it has, but that they still pose a problem. Francis pointed out, however, that many improvements to prevent crashes have been installed along the line since its inception.

Kubicek added that the technology on the Blue Line is so old, that it is not supported anywhere else today. Metro intends to phase out its Nippon Sharyo cars, which were designed to run 40,000 miles a year each, but in fact run between 80,000 and 100,000 miles a year. A mid-life overhaul of only half a million miles is the industry standard.

With regards to a Green Line extension to LAX, Francis replied that it’s “in the plans” and might be only 5 to 8 years away. Reed added that in past hearings regarding LAX, most plans featured only automobile and parking elements. A “change of guard” at both the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA) has enabled discussion about bringing transit to LAX. There is still a need to establish a working group between the City, LAWA and Metro, according to Francis. Parking revenues may pay for transit improvements, Francis added.

Jerard Wright, Transit Coalition Vice-President, asked that since local Gold Line end-to-end travel time was reduced to 29 minutes, why will express service stay now that the travel times are comparable. Shelburne replied that the express service has gained “quite a following,” as Metro soon discovered that the Lake station had lots of local traffic.

Passengers have also requested express trips in the reverse direction. As a result, Lake and Memorial Park were added to the short list of express stations. Shelburne emphasized that express trains will be necessary as the Gold Line becomes longer. The Blue Line was

once envisioned to have express trains, with possible use of adjacent Union Pacific track. The Expo Line may also have express service, according to Shelburne.

Wright also asked how does rail operations communicate with bus people when rail problems arise. Dwayne Martin replied that, in the case of buses, the bus operator speaks to the bus supervisor, who in turn speaks to the Blue Line field supervisor at the control center. However, getting a bus on short notice was “nearly impossible” because nearly all buses would have been in revenue service due to the service demands of the Consent Decree. Instead, Metro Rail focuses on clearing the track as quickly as possible, often throwing track switches manually. Shelburne agreed with Martin that communications continues to be the biggest challenge between bus and rail operations.

Tom Rubin, LAUSD consultant, asked about bike capacity on the trains. Kubicek answered that the 2550 cars have flip seats where bikes can be stored (which can also be used for baby strollers and luggage). Rubin then asked about bike racks at stations. Kubicek replied that there is a “terrorism issue” that must be addressed with respect to the racks.

When asked about late night service on Metro Rail, Shelburne responded with results of a study regarding said service. According to Shelburne, the Blue Line and the Red Line to North Hollywood were “winners” with respect to ridership potential, whereas the Green Line, Gold Line and Red Line to Wilshire/Western were “losers” with few late night riders. Subsequently, the Blue and Red Line schedules were adjusted with more service to meet the demand. Shelburne noted that late night ridership in systems such as in Chicago and Washington, D.C. is high, warranting the service.

When asked about increasing Red Line frequency, Shelburne revealed that Metro Rail would consider running Red Line trains to North Hollywood and Wilshire/Western on a 2-to-1 ratio. Currently, trains from each terminus run every 20 minutes, and the 6-car trains are at capacity.

Rubin asked what are the headway limits on the Gold Line relative to its existing propulsion system, noting that the Gold Line was intended to run 3-car configurations at 6-minute headways. Kubicek answered that the best headway possible was at 7 ½ minutes, as Metro discovered when it ran trains to and from Pasadena on New Year’s Day. Metro is building two more substations. Nevertheless, the 2550 cars will be 30% more efficient and will assist in feeding more power back to the system.