MTA stresses safety measures with opening of Orange Line extension

By Christina Villacorte christina.villacorte@dailynews.com 213-974-8985 twitter.com/LADNVillacorte Staff Writer
LA Daily News

Ellen Meyers is extra careful when driving near the original Orange Line busway and its soon-to-open extension.

A red light camera near the Pierce College station recently caught her husband committing a minor traffic violation, and the couple is still working to pay off the more than $400 fine.

"If you're not Johnny-on-the-spot, you're going to get those tickets," said Meyers, 58, a resident of Reseda.

"If you don't know you've moved up a few inches and snared the line - boom, they pop you with the camera."

The cameras are among several tools that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is counting on to ensure the safety of its drivers and passengers, as well as motorists and pedestrians navigating the streets and sidewalks around the busway, which opens a north-south extension next weekend.

When the original 14-mile Orange Line from North Hollywood to Warner Center opened in 2005, a dozen accidents were reported just in that first year, the most serious crashes caused by motorists running red lights.

That tally is now 81 accidents over the past seven years, but Gary Spivack, transportation manager for Metro's West San Fernando Valley Division, said crashes are happening less frequently than before. So far this year, only one accident has been reported.

With the 4-mile Orange Line extension from Canoga Park to Chatsworth opening Saturday, Metro is using an array of devices to ensure safety, including traffic lights, red lights embedded in the road asphalt, flashing lights that indicate a bus is coming and red light arrows that warn against making a right turn on red onto the busway.

"We have to strike a balance to get the right amount of signage that gives the public the clear indication of where they should and should not be on the intersection," Metro spokesman Dave Sotero said.

"If you have too little, you get complaints that people don't have enough guidance," he said. "If you have too much, they complain it's confusing."

Metro provided safety training at K-12 schools within a 1.5-mile radius of the extension, as well as at nearby public libraries, senior centers, recreation centers and community centers.

It also distributed more than 10,000 safety notices to homes and businesses throughout the area, and worked with other agencies to have traffic officers present while the line was being tested.

Hitesh Patel, project manager for the extension, said the work is still continuing.

"We're looking at ways to improve safety even now," he said.

Patel is particularly concerned about buses colliding with motorists who run a red light or who turn right on red
at a busway crossing and end up in the path of the bus.

He also urges people using the pedestrian walkway and the bike path, both located alongside the busway, to observe the rules. They should never get on the busway, or jaywalk across it.

Bart Reed, executive director of The Transit Coalition, noted no accidents have been reported since the buses began trial runs weeks ago. He believes motorists know how to act around the extension because they have lived with the original Orange Line for seven years now.

"People are used to it, so I think we're in good shape," he said.

Canoga Park resident Earl Hill, 53, said the traffic lights and signage are clear to him but might be confusing to someone not paying attention.

"A lot of people are so used to doing things a certain way that they're not registering the changes," he said. "The public just has to get used to the newness of it."

He's "excited" about the Orange Line extension but feels the busway is causing traffic jams at intersections.

"The worst is Saticoy and Canoga - it used to take me two minutes to drive through that intersection, but now it takes me 17-18 minutes," Hill said.

"Other than that, I love it."

Copyright ©2010 Los Angeles Newspaper Group.