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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA — THIS JUST IN

Metrolink chief credited for improving rail safety will step down

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Metrolink Chief Executive John Fenton, who has worked to improve the service and safety of the struggling commuter line following the deadly Chatsworth crash, announced his resignation Monday to become the head of a Florida-based railroad company.

Fenton's departure after almost 25 months on the job leaves Metrolink with a leadership vacuum at a time when the operation is trying to bolster ridership, reduce costs and install cutting edge safety measures, such as positive train control, a sophisticated collision avoidance system.

Fenton said he is stepping down for family and professional reasons to become the chief executive officer of Patriot Rail Corp. with headquarters in Boca Raton, Fla. The holding company, which is owned by SteelRiver Infrastructure Partners, operates 12 regional freight railroads throughout the United States.

"There is nothing at Metrolink that is causing me to leave," Fenton said. "It's been a wonderful experience and one of the most gratifying jobs I've had or will ever have. We've made a lot of progress since I arrived. I feel really good about the position that Metrolink is in."

The railroad, which has 512 miles of track, is the third largest commuter service in the nation. It averages more than 40,000 riders per week day from six Southern California counties, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego and Ventura.

"I am deeply saddened that he is leaving," said Bart Reed, executive director of the Transit Coalition. "He's turned a moribund agency into a vibrant, healthy organization."

Fenton, a former railroad vice president with broad transportation experience in the private sector, replaced David Solow, Metrolink's embattled chief executive who stepped down in December 2009 amid a management shake-up.

At the time, several million of dollars in inventory was unaccounted for. Ridership was declining, staff morale had plummeted and Metrolink had one of the worst safety records in the nation following the Chatsworth crash that killed 25 people and injured more than 130 in September 2008.

Federal investigators found a variety of safety lapses and primarily blamed the crash on a Metrolink engineer who was texting on his cell phone and ran a red stop signal before colliding head on with a Union Pacific freight train.

Since his arrival in April 2010, Fenton has been credited with reducing safety violations and injuries at Metrolink. On-time performance has improved, ridership has steadily grown and millions of dollars have been saved through changes in procedure.

His safety initiatives include the purchase of state-of-the art rail cars with energy absorbing technology and a partnership with safety experts at the Viterbi School of Engineering at USC.

His most ambitious move was a pledge to install positive train control by the end of 2013. Estimated to cost \$201 million, the system marries global positioning technology to computers and digital radio communications.

“His departure is a major loss for Southern California and Los Angeles,” said Prof. Najmedin Meshkati, who directs the safety program at the Viterbi School of Engineering. “His safety-culture related accomplishments in such a short time, just two years, were monumental and unique in the country.”

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— Dan Weikel

Photo: Metrolink CEO John Fenton, who announced his resignation Monday, waiting at the rail station in Pomona last June. Credit: Al Seib / Los Angeles Times

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