



Inland News

Rolling Whisper



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07:52 AM PDT on Thursday, May 31, 2007

DAN BERNSTEIN

It's not that I didn't want to get right back to work. It's just that after a long weekend, I needed a soft landing, some quiet time. I needed to be alone.

So I dug out a quarter and caught a Riverside trolley.

The trolleys (they're actually buses) have been a Riverside fixture for years. Their key distinguishing characteristic -- aside from the little red Rice-A-Roni cable car motif -- is their ghostly passengers.

Whenever a trolley passes before my eyes, I conduct a census. Sometimes, I actually see a passenger. Sometimes, two. Mostly, none. A trolley driver could develop a complex.

In 1998, the Riverside Transit Agency tried to boost ridership by offering lunchtime entertainment on the "Orange Blossom Express." One driver told me his sole passenger was an entertainer -- Mr. Mime -- who passed him notes ("Are you always this slow?") for 90 minutes.

Earlier this month, the RTA embarked upon a new campaign: It expanded the Red Line, intended mainly to shuttle jurors to and from remote lots. And it inaugurated the Green Line, aimed at the Metrolinkers in mornings and evenings and downtown feed-baggers at noon. The RTA has supposedly papered the town with fliers. But I had to call and search online for the closest stop. I liked my chances for solitude.

I caught the Green Line at City Hall and the driver (I was the only passenger, of course) asked where I was headed. I said I was just going to ride a while. It was 11:45 a.m.

She drove, as she put it, in a "big circle" -- a restaurant-rich loop along Market Street, past the convention center, Mission Inn on your right, up University, veer to Sevilla and the Coffee Depot, left at Mi Tortilla and back down to the courthouse and City Hall. Just three stops (five at commutin' time). About 12 minutes per circle.

I was thinking about how quietly May eases into June, about how tempting a Farmer Boys burger smells from a trolley, about world peace and when to clip my dog's toe nails when my meditations were interrupted. By a passenger!

I resented him at first. But he turned out to be a friendly paralegal who owned a Mercedes, but recognized the value

of a 25-cent jaunt to the courthouse. When he got off, I had my trolley to myself again.

The things Riversiders could do on these rolling chambers of silence: employee evaluations, marriage counseling, City Council executive sessions ...

This time, I was interrupted by a juror hitching a ride to a parking lot. She should have taken the Red Line! She's going home for lunch -- even though the Green Line was launched to ferry passengers to downtown restaurants. Oy.

The RTA, which is spending \$356K to run these trolleys, says it's too early to tell how the latest promo is going. In 15 "service days" in May, the Red Line trolley carried 640 passengers (mostly jury folks). My Green Line had 18 service days, but carried just 523 passengers -- about 29 per day.

After 45 minutes, the driver asked how much longer I intended to ride. Another half hour, I said. As long as you're on the trolley, she told me, I can't go to the restroom.

If the trolley had been packed, the poor woman would have had to suffer. But even after just 45 minutes of relative Green Line privacy, I felt like a new man.

I was ready to get back to work.

Reach Dan Bernstein at 951-368-9439 or dbernstein@PE.com
