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Trolley takes town for a spin

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Some kids on the sidewalk make a pulling motion with their hands and yell, "Ring the bell!"

The trolley gladly replies with a double ring as it turns the corner.

An older gentleman, sitting on a porch swing, waves hello.

The trolley gives another ring as it drives by.

And if it could smile, it would.

With a shiny red exterior and polished wood and brass inside, the Redlands trolley is bound to be an attraction as it travels its prescribed route through Redlands every day.

Please don't use the words "mass transit" around the trolley, as it considers itself a specialized mode of transportation designed to uniquely transport the citizens of Redlands to their important destinations.

In fact, some social circles consider the trolley something of a celebrity, as it is often used by tourists as a guided tour bus to see some of the landmarks and attractions of Redlands.

How did you get involved?

The trolley was the brainchild of Ginny George, wife of former Councilman Gary George.

"One day, we were discussing how freshman and sophomore students are discouraged from driving cars to campus at the University of Redlands," said Gary George, "and how that limits those students from going into the community to do their volunteering.

"So we thought, what if we brought them into town on a trolley, which would also be a way of preserving our heritage and history."

Through a survey, people were asked what they would be willing to pay, where the trolley should run and what frequency of trips would be needed for the trolley to be useful.

"Then I went into grant writing to fund the project," George said.

No city general funds were used for the project.

Instead, George sought funds from the Federal Transit Administration, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, San Bernardino Associated Governments and other grants.

About \$4 million and three years later, the trolleys were a reality.

When the city of Redlands and Omnitrans teamed up on the project, it was agreed that a good idea would be to use the trolley to get some of the bigger buses off the streets where ridership was low, George said.

Routes were chosen through public hearings, ridership estimates and input from Omnitrans and the Trolley Consortium - a group of businesses and organizations that contributed to the project.

Omnitrans Route 30 was replaced by the trolley's red line, and Route 31 was replaced by the blue line.

What is the mission?

The trolley began charming people into riding through town in style on Sept. 2, 2003. It was immediately a trendsetter with its clean running system that was worth the extra money, George said.

Diesel would have been cheaper, he said, but the trolley was conceived as a clean air unit and the beginning of a conversion to compressed natural gas (CNG) in other large vehicles owned by the city.

A city CNG fueling station was included in the funding for the project, which George said will be an added benefit down the road when other vehicles are converted.

The trolley triplets work seven days a week, with two on active duty and one remaining in reserve in case of a breakdown or any other stress that might take a trolley out of commission.

The trolleys are very proud of the service they provide to the citizens of Redlands, with many of their riders being regular customers.

Once sporting a red line and a blue line, the routes have been combined now into one blue line.

In the afternoon, students from Cope Middle School and Redlands High School catch a ride home and rock the world of the trolley. One of them is bound to try and sneak on with a drink.

Is the mission successful?

The trolley humbly takes pride in itself.

Inspired by its ancestor, an 1899 motorized trolley operated by the Redlands Street Railway Co., the authentic look and feel of the trolley reminds residents and visitors of the rich heritage of the community.

It is also economical. CNG is only about \$1 per gallon compared to more than \$2 per gallon for diesel.

What are the challenges?

From the trolley's perspective, the biggest challenge would be to convince folks not to park at the bus stop, and to be courteous while driving and watch out for the trolley which is a little slow-starting at times.

From George's perspective, the challenge was to keep ridership high enough so it is financially feasible to run after the three-year trial period is up. Whether or not that will happen is still in question.

The trolley ran strong in its first year, averaging eight riders per hour with a goal of 10 to 12 riders per hour. Ridership has since dropped.

Another challenge, George said, is reaching as many people as possible on the predetermined route.

"The main feedback is RWhy doesn't the trolley come to my house?" I say the trolley can go anywhere, but it can't go everywhere."

What is in the future?

The future of the trolley is uncertain. Mayor Pro-Tem Pat Gilbreath, who is a director on the Omnitrans board, said all lines are assessed quarterly, and that funding for the trolley line is contingent on the trolley revenue reaching or exceeding 20 percent of its operating costs. Red line revenues had fallen to 4 percent of operating costs before it was discontinued.

About the Redlands trolley

Born: in the minds of former Councilman Gary George and his wife, Ginny.

Raised: Specialty Vehicles, Newport Beach

Parents: Omnitrans and city of Redlands

Family: The trolley triplets live at the Omnitrans yard with their older siblings, the big buses.

Education: Memorizing new route for the blue line.

Claim to fame: Once appeared at Market Night on State Street.

Hobbies: Exercising, traveling, hanging out at Redlands Mall for seven minutes between routes.

Television: Doesn't watch television, but does enjoy watching the traffic signal change colors.

Books: Makes a stop near the bookstore at Citrus Plaza.

Pet peeve: Drivers who are too busy to be courteous and passengers who spill drinks on the floor.

Retirement: Hopes for a long life of service to the communities of Redlands. About the Redlands trolley

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