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Santa Cruz METRO's Paracruz Service Celebrates 15 Years

Santa Cruz, CA, Oct. 31, 2019 – “The first day was crazy. It was just chaos,” said Daniel Zaragoza. Today Mr. Zaragoza runs Paracruz for Santa Cruz METRO as the Operations Manager for the Paratransit Division. But 15 years ago, he was behind the wheel. On November 1, Paracruz will mark its 15th year operated by Santa Cruz METRO.

Today, Paracruz has served as estimated 1.5 million customer trips and Zaragoza can confidently state that the days of “chaos” are firmly behind us. Thanks to a recent class of new-hire Paracruz Operators, Santa Cruz METRO Paracruz clients are enjoying an increase in reliability and on-time performance now that METRO has addressed some of the challenges caused by a spate of departures that left the division short staffed.

Santa Cruz METRO's Paracruz service got its start as “Lift Line” following the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. In 2004, Santa Cruz METRO brought the service in-house to help improve efficiencies as costs associated with the on-demand service began to increase.

Most transit agencies nation-wide, began to recognize the challenges that the so-called “silver tsunami” would present as the generation aged into retirement and beyond. Controlling costs and developing suitable service alternatives to address the rising demand for paratransit service has been an ongoing challenge. But one that Paracruz is succeeding in addressing. Through strategic scheduling and recruiting improvements, the service has seen substantial improvements in its on-time performance record and in the number of customers it is able to service per hour. These are some of the measurements that paratransit service looks at to determine their reliability and efficiency.

“The first day was crazy,” said Daniel Zaragoza, Operations Manager, Paracruz – Paratransit Division of Santa Cruz METRO. “I drove for 11 and a half hours that day. It took three or four days but things got better and they've been getting better ever since.”

“Here in the office, we learned how to dispatch before we went live. It was a different story once we were serving actual customers. But we learned fast!” said Candis Almanza, Paratransit Supervisor.

In Paracruz' early days, Zaragoza got his start as a driver and Ms. Almanza got her start as a scheduler and dispatcher. Now Mr. Zaragoza runs the Division and Ms. Almanza oversees Paracruz service as a

Supervisor. But those early days as a driver have contributed to his understanding of the customer's unique needs and the best way to serve customers with special cognitive or physical challenges.

"Customer Service is the heart and soul of paratransit service. As an organization, we've made customer service a top priority as part of the hiring process. We can teach a new recruit to drive, but teaching those soft skills - like how to respond with patience and compassion when transporting an Alzheimer's patient - those skills are harder to teach," said Alex Clifford, Chief Executive Officer for Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District.

Hiring for those soft skills has been one of the important adjustments, Paracruz has made in the last few hiring cycles to really help to identify the candidates who excel at Customer Service during the recruitment process. Making that a top priority is paying dividends with customers today and creating a new model for the future of Santa Cruz METRO service.

About Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District

Established in 1968, Santa Cruz METRO provides fixed route and Highway 17 commuter service throughout Santa Cruz County, with limited service connecting to Monterey Salinas Transit at our Watsonville Transit Center and Santa Clara County, transporting more than 5 million passenger trips a year. METRO also operates Paracruz paratransit service to Santa Cruz County service, providing about 72,000 trips per year. METRO's operating budget in FY19 is \$52 million and is funded through a combination of farebox revenues, sales tax and state and federal sources. Today it operates a fleet of 98 buses on 26 fixed routes. For more information, visit www.scmttd.com