

South Coast Area Transit

Summary

In response to a citizen complaint, the Ventura County 2004-2005 Grand Jury investigated the South Coast Area Transit (SCAT) operations to determine if their driver certifications, vehicle maintenance and money-handling procedures were either unsafe or not being followed. After investigation, the Grand Jury determined that SCAT follows all required procedures.

Background

The Grand Jury received a citizen complaint about various safety concerns with SCAT. The complaint alleged that SCAT allowed unlicensed or unqualified operators to drive buses, that SCAT did not make timely or appropriate repairs to their buses, and that SCAT's process for collecting and handling of fares was subject to theft and fraud.

SCAT, located in the City of Oxnard, operates under a joint powers agreement to provide bus service to the cities of Ojai, Oxnard, Port Hueneme, San Buenaventura and the unincorporated areas between these cities. Pursuant to California Penal Code section 925a, the Grand Jury is authorized to "investigate and report on the method and system of performing the duties" of all joint powers agencies located in the county. Due to the serious and specific nature of the allegations, the Grand Jury initiated an investigation.

Methodology

The intent of the Grand Jury investigation was to determine the requirements for bus driver certifications, vehicle maintenance, the handling of fare monies and to determine if SCAT was meeting those requirements. To that end, the Grand Jury conducted interviews with the complainant and witnesses, toured the SCAT facilities and subsequently met with various SCAT officials to obtain in-depth briefings on vehicle inspection and maintenance operations, driver training and certification processes, fare handling and verification, and other matters relating to their business operations.

The Grand Jury obtained and reviewed the SCAT joint powers agreement originally signed in 1973. Various procedural documents and historical maintenance records were requested and reviewed by the Grand Jury. Inspection records from the Motor Carrier Safety Division of the California Highway Patrol (CHP) as well as SCAT were reviewed.

Findings

F-01. SCAT currently employs 91 bus drivers for a fleet of 70 vehicles, consisting of 49 buses and 21 sedans and vans. The 49 buses include 3 diesel powered and 46 using compressed natural gas (CNG) engines.

Vehicle Operators

- F-02.** Vehicle operators must undergo training (8 hours of classroom or 8 hours behind-the-wheel) every 12 months and maintain a valid medical certificate as required by California Vehicle Code (CVC) section 12804.6 and Educational Code section 40085.5.
- F-03.** The Motor Carriers Division of the CHP administers a Biennial Inspection of Terminals (BIT) program. The program was created by the California Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1988.
- F-04.** One part of the BIT program requires SCAT to enroll its bus drivers in the Department of Motor Vehicles program known as the Pull Notice Program.
- F-05.** Upon receipt of an employee's driving record, the Pull Notice Coordinator will notify the employee's supervisor of any activity that warrants further review or discussion, as defined in section 1808.1 of the CVC.
- F-06.** Drivers may drive no more than ten hours following eight hours of off duty (California Code of Regulations, Title 13, Division 2).
- F-07.** All SCAT drivers are randomly tested for drugs (Section 34520 CVC and 49CFR 382).
- F-08.** All buses are equipped with two-way radios for emergency assistance.
- F-09.** Road calls include reporting tire damage from road debris, the malfunction of coin boxes and unsafe conditions.

Vehicle Maintenance

- F-10.** There are safety and vehicle maintenance considerations in the use of CNG to fuel buses. A CNG vehicle systems check must be performed on the methane and fire suppression systems. There is a mandatory annual tank inspection.
- F-11.** SCAT vehicle maintenance is identified by one of three priority levels: (1) intermediate, (2) operator, or (3) preventive. These levels are determined primarily by the nature of the repair.
- F-12.** Intermediate maintenance is typically required to correct defects reported by operators. These defects would typically be equipment failures or safety concerns that the operators believe would render the vehicles unsafe to operate.
- F-13.** Operator maintenance includes activities that every bus operator is required to perform. The intent is to maintain the equipment in a safe, clean and serviceable condition and to ensure early detection of defects or malfunctions that might lead to unsafe conditions or costly repairs.
- F-14.** Preventive maintenance includes activities that are scheduled to avoid unnecessary repairs. All SCAT vehicles are scheduled for inspection every 60 days or 3,000 miles.
- F-15.** A special category of work is performed by the maintenance operators. This includes replacement of driver seats for maximum comfort, replacing wheel chair and bike rack straps with upgraded strength, and various cosmetic repairs.

F-16. All bus terminals are rated “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory.” SCAT has never received an “unsatisfactory” report (CHP 343 [Rev. 10-00] OPI 062).

Fares and Money Handling

F-17. Each bus is equipped with a fare box.

F-18. On occasion the fare box will become jammed. This usually happens because a passenger has accidentally dropped something along with coins into the fare box.

F-19. When the fare box becomes jammed there is a coin bypass that can be activated. This practice is not always successful.

F-20. SCAT has a road call service. Drivers can call for a fare box replacement.

F-21. The operator has a computer that tallies the fares as the passengers deposit them. This tabulation includes money, tokens and passes. The count is not meant to be 100% accurate.

F-22. SCAT facility operates a small secure money counting room. This room contains a large safe, coin and bill counters and four security cameras. The only door is self-locking and four employees have keys. The safe can be accessed from either inside the room or from an opening on the outside wall.

F-23. When a bus returns to the terminal at the end of the day the fare box is removed by garage personnel. It is then taken to the outside wall of the counting room where it is connected to the safe and the money is funneled inside.

F-24. The money is not touched from the time it enters the fare box until it is being counted.

F-25. The money is collected every day in the same manner. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday the money is removed from the safe in buckets and counted by four employees. It is then bagged, sealed and taken to the bank by security truck.

Conclusions

C-01. SCAT follows a well-documented plan of maintenance. Passenger safety and employee safety are a direct result of SCAT’s maintenance. (F-11 thru F-14)

C-02. Driver certifications are in conformance to specified requirements. (F-02, F-03, F-05, F-06, F-07)

C-03. Collection of fares is appropriate. (F-16 thru F-25)

Recommendations

None noted.

Responses

None required.

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