

Hwy 17 Express marks 10 years

Transportation - 2000

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Route takes commuters over the hill, back

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SANTA CRUZ » Highway 17 Express service celebrated a 10-year anniversary Friday, with several Bay Area transit officials on hand to fete a service used by hundreds of thousands of commuters annually.

The bus actually dates back 25 years, when local Santa Cruz Metro buses began going over the

hill to help people get to work in the wake of the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. A decade ago, Metro managed to formalize the route by striking a deal consolidating service from several Bay Area transit agencies.

"I thought if you could put it all together where all the agencies worked collectively, that would be a fantastic service," said ex-Metro general manager Les White, who retired this week.

During peak hours, buses run as often as every 20 minutes, and are equipped with Wi-Fi and bike racks and carry about 1,000 people to work and back every weekday. On weekends, ridership switches to tourists and visitors looking to hit local beaches.

David Kutrosky, managing director of the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority, said the success of the route is continuing. He's seen 50 percent growth in the last five years in the number of train passengers transferring to the

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Alex Clifford, the new CEO and general manager of Santa Cruz Metro, attends the Metro's 25th anniversary of the Highway 17 Express route Friday.

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Express.

"This is by far the fastest growing segment of our service," Kutrosky said.

Nuria Fernandez, general manager of the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, said the route is a symbol of people coming together to help in times of crisis.

"It's a phoenix that came out of the devastation of the wreckage of the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake, but it's

also a recognition that when there is a call for help, we stand up and we say yes, and we make a difference," Fernandez said.

The service's startup was aided greatly by \$6.5 million in funding secured by Fred Keeley and Bruce McPherson, then the county's representatives in the state Legislature. Metro, CalTrans, VTA, Amtrak and Capitol Corridor are all partners on the route.

"The really important thing was we had five agencies that got together and said, 'This is a really good thing to serve the public,'"

McPherson said.

Keeley said the service is an example of what can happen when people together on creative solutions to a problem.

"Think of what the equivalent is in cost of increasing the capacity of Highway 17 (versus) what these buses do every day in terms of taking cars off the road in a clean, environmentally sound, sustainable way," Keeley said.

The celebration was also the first public event for new Metro CEO and General Manager Alex Clifford, who was sworn in this week after a 17-day family road trip

from Chicago. He said there was room for growth on the route.

"We'll continue to market that and make this partnership better and better as time goes on," Clifford said.