

Flagmen Keep Cars Rolling Through Record Heat

By Jennifer Wake



Mountain Cascade flagmen directing traffic in 104 degree heat

Photo Jennifer Wake

When temperatures reach triple digits, most of us run to the sanctity of our air conditioned homes or offices. But when your office is the hard pavement of a busy street and your uniform is heavy boots, a hard hat, reflector vest and a stop sign, there is no escape.

The Mountain Cascade flagmen who have been keeping cars moving on the detour routes along St. Mary's Road and Moraga Road during the Moraga Road Pipeline Construction Project have one of the hardest jobs, says Mountain Cascade project manager Tony Batista. On a typical day, paving materials can reach 150 degrees, according to a report on urban heat islands by the Environmental Protection Agency. The excess heat radiates away from the ground, adding to the stifling heat of the

summer sun. And the recent poor air quality only makes things worse.

"People think that flagging is an easy job," Batista says, "but it's one of the tougher jobs out there."

In addition to braving the elements, flaggers must endure their eight hour shift by themselves, while staying alert to any traffic problems, keeping buses on schedule, and staying courteous to passing motorists. "People flagging get all the grief, obscene gestures and comments," says Mountain Cascade Project Coordinator John Eudy. "If a bus is behind a couple of cars, they flag the cars through to keep the bus on schedule. Everyone is 'flagmen certified' to keep things running smoothly and to avoid accidents."

Fortunately, Batista says

most people (about 98 percent) have been cordial. But a choice few have tried to get past the system, and have even put flagmen in danger.

Some motorists have ignored the road closure signs, continuing along Moraga Road until they are finally re-diverted back to the detour route. One driver reportedly swerved at a flagger a couple of weeks ago. "They're probably teenage kids messing around having fun, but they could accidentally hit the gas or the brake and you have a guy hurt or killed because someone wanted a laugh," Eudy says.

All flagmen have business cards they hand to disgruntled motorists with contact numbers to lodge complaints to EBMUD Community Affairs Representative Nora Harlow. "Nora has received some complaints and

some suggestions, but a lot of phone calls and emails complimenting the flaggers and thanking them for their hard work," Eudy says. "She drives the route regularly to see if there are any problems. There haven't been any accidents, thank God. All the residents and locals are getting used to it. When I was at a recent family function, I was told that it's easier to get down some roads because they're flagging traffic smoothly through without stopping."

Keeping things running smoothly, however, is a lonely job. One Mountain Cascade worker said two friends (one a flagman) were carpooling; because he hadn't talked to anyone all day, the flagman talked non-stop to his friend the entire way home. Although Dave Papst, the Flagger Foreman, rotates the flagmen, makes sure they get the breaks they need and time to sit down, and is taking extended measures to keep his men hydrated, it doesn't make it easy.

There are no iPods, there is no chit-chat by a water cooler. There's just the hum of cars passing by and an occasional wave of a friendly hand – or a less than friendly finger.

"I wouldn't want to be standing on my feet all day in the hot sun," Eudy says. "Slow down, take it slow. The flagmen are working out there to make all the residents' drives smoother. Be courteous. Be patient. You'll get to work on time. One minute longer is not going to hurt you."