

Busline

November/December 2019

**Safety, Punctuality,
Friendliness And Professionalism**

Busline Motorcoach Cover Feature

Classic Charter

Visalia, CA



Corpus Christi RTA

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Jorge Cruz-Aedo, CEO





Chris Riddington and Melissa Riddington



Safety, Punctuality, Friendliness And Professionalism

Key Attributes Help Classic Charter Succeed In The Central Valley & Beyond

By Harrell Kerkhoff, *Busline Magazine* Editor

“Being flexible and communicating well goes a long way in helping our customers have a good time while traveling in one of our vehicles, whether it’s a large motorcoach, shuttle bus, SUV or van.”

— *Classic Charter President Chris Riddington*

Flexibility and good communication skills are critical elements to providing superior customer service. That is especially true when working with a wide variety of customers in the charter and tour transportation business, where other attributes — such as safety, punctuality, friendliness and professionalism — are also a must.

Those are the same characteristics that have benefited **Classic Charter, Inc.**, a 30-plus year transportation company based in **Visalia, CA**, throughout its history.

“We have always understood that charter and tour travel is a luxury. Our customers are not required to take the trips that we, as a company, are fortunate enough to provide. Therefore, we have to treat our customers like they are gold. We always want them to come back,” **Classic Charter**

President Chris Riddington said. “Our employees work hard to make sure customer needs are met. It’s that simple, but definitely not always easy.

“Being flexible and communicating well goes a long way in helping our customers have a good time while traveling in one of our vehicles, whether it’s a large motorcoach, shuttle bus, SUV or van. Customers don’t always understand the transportation industry and the things that we, as a transportation provider, can and can’t do. That is where communication comes into play, working with customers so that trips go as planned, and people enjoy the experience of group travel.”

With a fleet of 44 vehicles — including a recent purchase of seven Van Hool CX35 motorcoaches from ABC Companies — Classic Charter is involved with many types of transportation services.

“We provide just about everything. Many of our smaller vehicles, such as SUVs and vans, are used for airport shuttles, weddings, etc. Meanwhile, our motorcoaches, which make up the majority of Classic Charter’s fleet, are used for school trips, military transportation, corporate and large shuttle events, church transportation and for any other group that needs a coach,” Riddington said. “Group charter is our biggest travel segment. We don’t provide nearly as many over-the-road tours, such as the kind that take 5 to 10 days to complete, although that type of service is provided by our company as well.

“We did take a local sports team all the way to Florida and back within the past year. It took about 15 days. Over the years, we have also taken groups to places like Texas, so they could attend such events as family reunions.”



Company founder, Les Riddington

HOME IN THE VALLEY

California’s Central Valley comprises a large portion of The Golden State’s interior. Up to 60 miles wide and approximately 450 miles in length, the Central Valley is partially bounded by the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the east and California’s Northern and Southern Coast Ranges to the west. The Central Valley is home to one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world, providing more than half the fruits, vegetables and nuts grown in the United States. It’s also the proud home of Classic Charter, the company’s employees and many of its customers and passengers.

Classic Charter’s main facility is in the city of Visalia, located approximately 190 miles north of Los Angeles, with an estimated population of 130,000 residents.

“The facility is approximately 16,000 square feet in size. It’s located on five acres of land in an industrial park, and includes office space, a maintenance garage/wash rack and a drivers lounge,” Riddington said. “We added 6,000 square feet of space to our garage one year ago. It now includes eight service bays. We can wash and fuel all our equipment at that site.”

Classic Charter also has smaller hubs located in the fellow Central Valley cities of **Fresno, Bakersfield and Merced.**

“We have drivers and equipment at those locations, allowing us

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to be closer to certain customer groups,” Riddington said. “I would say our main hub, however, is all of California. We travel throughout the state as well as the western United States, especially Nevada, Arizona and Washington.

“The great part of being based in California is that there is so much to do and see in the state. That includes Yosemite National Park, Disneyland, large metropolitan areas such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, all types of museums, amusement parks and sports venues — along with mile upon mile of beaches and mountains.”

In fact, Classic Charter provides a multiday trip every year, called “California Dreaming,” for a tour agency.

“It involves transporting people to different sites up and down California. The trip comes with a very busy itinerary,” Riddington said. “There is no shortage of places to visit and experience in this state.”

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Family company ownership is quite common in the North American bus and motorcoach industry. Therefore, many a current owner of a charter and/or tour operation spent his/her early years in the family business washing buses, pushing brooms and “helping” the mechanic. That was certainly the case for Chris Riddington, whose father, the late **Les Riddington**, started Classic Charter with a business partner in 1985.

“As a kid, I started in the wash rack. I don’t know if I really cleaned any buses, but it’s where I began in this business,” Riddington said, while laughing. “During high school, I eventually

spent time working in the maintenance department and then moved to the office. It was there that I found my forte, helping my dad with the company’s office computer system.

“I remember my dad asking me one time, when I was somewhere around 18 to 21, ‘Are you sure you want to stay in this business?’ That was back when everyone was carrying a pager, and those things seemed to constantly be interrupting what you wanted to get accomplished at work. I responded to my dad’s question by simply saying, ‘Yes, I do.’

“I know the transportation industry can be challenging, especially on the ownership side. It’s a 24/7 life, but I love buses and working with the people in this industry. It’s not for everyone, but transportation provides good careers for a lot of people.”

Les Riddington’s experience in transportation began in the 1970s, working as a dispatcher for a charter bus company in California. He later worked at an auto dealership, and, in 1985, became a 50 percent partner in a new venture in Visalia — Classic Charter.

“They started from scratch, with three buses, operating the company’s first charter trip on Valentine’s Day 1985,” Riddington said. “By father bought out his partner and became the sole owner of Classic Charter in 1994. Unfortunately, he died in 1997, leaving my mother, **Sharon Riddington**, and I as the owners of the company. At that time, we had 11 vehicles and around 20 to 25 employees. Over the years, we have built up our fleet to 44 vehicles, and now employ approximately 80 people.”

Upon his father’s death, Chris Riddington moved from a sales position at Classic Charter to become president, and soon realized he needed help.

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“Fortunately my wife, **Melissa Riddington**, who was going to college at the time, also started working at Classic Charter in 1998. She has worked at our company from the ground up, and now serves as **vice president** and **general manager**,” Riddington said.

Classic Charter Maintenance Director Craig Walker has been another longtime associate and key part of the company’s success.

“My dad had known Craig since the early 1980s, when they both were employed at an auto dealership, and was able to persuade him to work for Classic Charter on a part-time basis in 1985,” Riddington said. “Craig and my dad always got along really well. As Classic Charter grew, Craig became our full-time maintenance director. He now oversees a shop foreman and our other mechanics.

“Our company is fortunate to have a lot of very good and loyal employees. Many of those people have been working at Classic Charter for 10 or more years.”



The exterior of several Classic Charter vehicles highlight the Central Valley’s agriculture industry.

THE ‘ART’ OF BEING DIFFERENT

When Classic Charter began in 1985, all three of the company’s buses featured the same look, with identical paint schemes. Although that “sameness” is customary among many bus/coach operators, Les Riddington wanted his company to be different. When it came to the exterior look of his buses, “sameness” simply would not do.

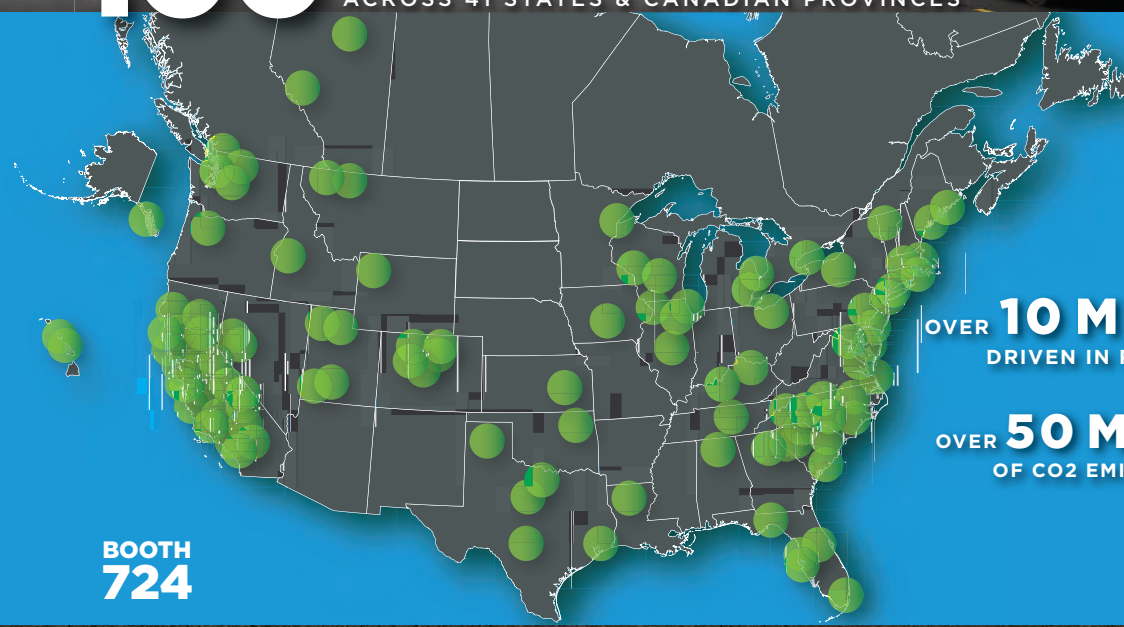
“My dad decided that each of his buses would have a distinct look. Specific art work, shown on the exterior of our vehicles, was incorporated, depicting different themes. One themed-bus that particularly stood out was our ‘space bus.’ The entire vehicle was painted with a space scene. It definitely got noticed. In fact, during the early 1990s there was a nationally known hip-hop duo called *Kris Kross*, whose members requested traveling in our ‘space bus,’” Riddington said. “Other themes included a bus with cows


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painted on its sides, and one with hot air balloons. That was back in the days when you actually had to paint the art work on the bus, before wraps were common. We had artists at our facility all the time to air brush scenes on those vehicles.”

Riddington, along with his team at Classic Charter, has carried on in Les Riddington’s footsteps with the use of artistically-themed vehicles.

“The (bus graphics) themes are a big draw among our customers and the general public.

Our vehicles are hard to miss, which is the intent.”

“There are now 38 such vehicles at our company. They include a ‘swoop design’ on the sides, with the specific art work located inside that swoop,” he said. “Several of our themes revolve around agriculture found in the Central Valley. That includes a vehicle featuring strawberries and another one with grapes. Our cow-themed coach is a heavy favorite for many. My dad had a bus painted like a Holstein cow years ago, as there are many dairies in the Central Valley. We now have a ‘cow bus’ as well. Everybody loves it. People will call us and say, ‘We want the cow bus.’”

“One time we used ‘the cow bus’ to pick up some kids who were on a school trip and were left stranded, after their vehicle had broken down. Later, my wife received a big, hand-written thank you card with a cow drawn on it, signed by all of the school children we had transported. That bus made a big impression on those kids.”

Riddington said the themed vehicles from Classic Charter also

make a big impression on many people traveling the various interstates and highways in California and beyond.

“The themes are a big draw among our customers and the general public. Our vehicles are hard to miss, which is the intent,” he said. “We take time thinking of new themes to use for future vehicles, such as one highlighting California’s Yosemite National Park as well as our state’s famous wine country.”

Overall, Classic Charter has a varied fleet of vehicles, from eight-passenger SUVs to 12-passenger vans to larger buses and motorcoaches. As mentioned, the company’s fleet now includes seven recently purchased 40-passenger Van Hool CX35 motorcoaches from ABC Companies.

“The 35-foot motorcoach is new for us. We have always been a 40- and 45-foot motorcoach company. The Van Hool CX35s will help us transport smaller groups, such as those we take to summer camps,” Riddington said. “We also have 48-passenger Van Hool TX 40-footers in our motorcoach fleet. Our largest vehicle is an 81-passenger Van Hool TD925 double-decker, which customers love.”

Classic Charter’s relationship with ABC Companies has been a long one, starting when Riddington was helping his dad as a teenager.

“We have developed strong friendships with representatives of ABC Companies, and have, over the years, purchased many used, and later new, vehicles from ABC,” Riddington said. “I have also toured the Van Hool factory in Europe, and have always been impressed with their customer service and parts availability.

“ABC Companies is also a big supporter of our California Bus Association. A lot of their people come to the association’s events.

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It's nice to see them supporting our industry that way."

Like many of today's bus/motorcoach operators, Classic Charter's modern vehicles offer a wide variety of passenger amenities and safety devices. Perhaps the strongest request by customers as of late, according to Riddington, is for seat belts.

"We get calls from customers, such as school districts, on a weekly — if not daily — basis, telling us that every vehicle they use must have seat belts. That demand started around 2012 and has grown. More customers are wanting, and expecting, access to seat belts for their group members," he said. "We also continue to see increasing demand for Wi-Fi, especially from such groups as sports teams."

"We get calls from customers, such as school districts, on a weekly — if not daily — basis, telling us that every vehicle they use must have seat belts."

Riddington has seen many changes over the years in the type of amenities available for buses/motorcoaches.

"My dad was one of the first operators in our area to put videos on buses. I remember helping install 6-inch CRT monitors in our buses because everybody wanted video," he said. "Today, people want to plug in their personal devices using an 110-volt outlet, and be able to watch anything they desire."

Of course, modern amenities and technological advancements are not just for passengers. Drivers, too, want, and need, the latest of what is available in comfort and safety.

"Obviously, most drivers are like passengers — they like the newer equipment. When it comes to added safety, there are now such advancements as lane departure and tire monitoring warning systems. We have vehicles where, if the bus/coach enters another lane, a device will shake the driver's seat on the side the seat that the vehicle is changing lanes. That is a pretty cool safety amenity to have," Riddington said. "Today's driver cockpits are also much nicer. Modern coaches are very comfortable for both passengers and drivers, and the turning radius is so much better. I haven't had to worry about a steering box in 10 years. Overall, the vehicles are easier to operate for our drivers."

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

As Classic Charter is well into its third decade of operation, Riddington reflected on what it takes for a transportation company to not only stay in business, but grow, in today's industry.

"It takes a great team of employees, including trusted drivers and mechanics. It's also important to save money whenever possible, so that the company can get through any lean periods," he said. "It's mainly about dedication and making the company the best it can be on a daily basis."

As with any part of the country, there are certain challenges and opportunities to running a transportation business in the Central Valley of California. Advantages include a diversified client base, good access to highly desired travel locations, and, by and large, good driving weather.

Disadvantages include finding enough



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qualified people to hire in the Central Valley, and meeting the often rigorous regulations associated with conducting business in California.

"It can be difficult finding a strong labor force in the Central Valley, due to a lower population compared to other parts of the state," Riddington said. "Our other main challenge as a transportation provider is meeting standards set by the California Air Resources Board (CARB). Due to those standards, we have been challenged to upgrade our fleet at a pace faster than ever before. That is a real challenge, especially while trying to remain financially viable.

"As a company, it's important that we take care of our people. This is a 24-hour business. We have people on call 24/7. Therefore, we need to make sure all of our employees are doing well and, if there are problems, help solve those issues the best way possible."

"You can spend a lot of money making sure a vehicle is CARB-compliant, and then five years later that same vehicle may no longer be in compliance. It seems there is a lot of proposed legislation that comes out of Sacramento (California's state capital) that our industry has to continually battle. Despite that, I feel demand for safe and reliable transportation in California will continue to grow."

Today, Classic Charter employs approximately 80 people. Most work within four company departments: charter sales, maintenance, cleaning/dispatch and operations. Finding good employees, especially drivers, is not always easy in today's era of low unem-

ployment rates. Also, not everybody can, or wants to, drive a large vehicle full of people, in sometimes heavy traffic and/or dicey weather situations.

Riddington said there are certain characteristics often present in drivers who successfully earn a living transporting large groups of people.

"I feel a good driver is one who really likes to be on the road, likes to drive and who does not mind seeing a different work schedule from week to week," he said. "The majority of our trips are charter or tour by nature. One day a driver may pick up a group at 7 a.m. and take those people to Disneyland. The following day that same driver may be transporting a sports team to a totally different type of destination.

"Most good bus/motorcoach drivers like doing something different everyday. They also must truly like working with people and have good communication skills. Our drivers have to work with a wide range of passengers, from kindergarteners to senior citizens. It also helps if a driver is financially savvy.

"There are many times in this industry where a transportation provider is super busy. That means drivers are working five to six days a week. It is during those times that a driver should save some money, to better get through the slower travel periods, as this line of work can be seasonal. Our experienced drivers are good at being able to save money during the busy times," he said. "Overall, I feel a good bus/motorcoach driver should be a people person, while also enjoying the traveling aspect of the job."

Riddington said his company combats the challenges of finding quality employees, including drivers, by offering the proper level

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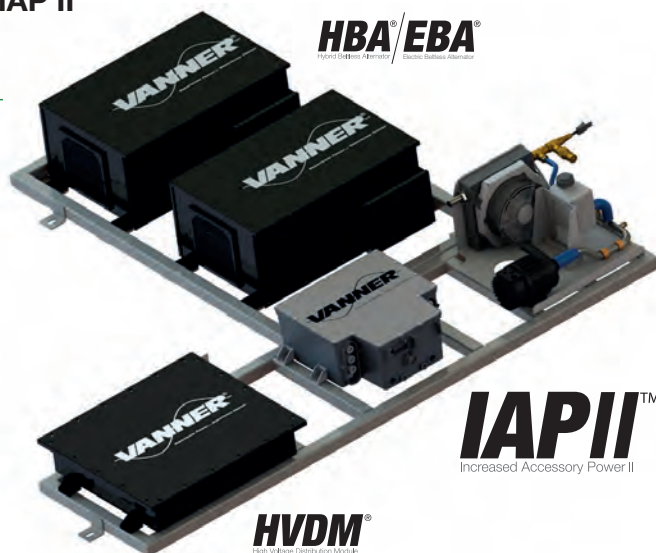
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of compensation and a satisfying work environment. He reiterated that proper communication with employees is critical.

"As a company, it's important that we take care of our people. This is a 24-hour business. We have people on call 24/7. Therefore, we need to make sure all of our employees are doing well and, if there are problems, help solve those issues the best way possible," he said.

Riddington added that many of his company's drivers are hired through word of mouth, although classified ads are also placed in different geographical locations. He said recent pressures in California for drivers to have a minimum of two years driving experience, prior to being hired by an operator, is causing some concerns.

"We take great care in training all of our drivers at Classic Coach, and are always trying to add to our driver pool. We feel that if you are not constantly training as a company, that pool will get smaller. A two-year minimum requirement can take the training aspect away from us when it comes to new hires, which we don't like," Riddington said. "Sometimes, when you can only hire drivers with a minimum of two years experience, you are basically hiring a lot of truck drivers, and truck drivers are not necessarily bus/motorcoach drivers. That is why we like to train people to drive from the ground up at our company."

The vast majority of Classic Charter drivers are California SPAB (School Pupil Activity Bus) certified, which means they are allowed to transport school children in the state.

"Becoming SPAB certified involves meeting a lot of requirements through the California Highway Patrol (CHP). It includes

fingerprinting, the passing of a background check, the passing of CHP written and driving tests, along with 40 hours of training from a state certified trainer," Riddington said. "Continual training is also required once drivers initially receive their SPAB certification. They must maintain a good driving record as well, with no criminal record. My father made sure our drivers were SPAB certified, and we have continued the practice. I feel it's the highest level of training that a charter bus driver can receive.

"Training is a daily occurrence at Classic Charter. There are always classes in session with certified instructors. We use a computer program that helps us track all our training requirements. It's a constant process."

Riddington added that driver retention is of utmost importance at Classic Charter. That is due to the amount of time, effort and money it takes to properly hire and train each driver.

A TRUSTED NAME

After 30-plus years of transporting a wide variety of passenger groups around California's Central Valley and beyond, Riddington said he is happy with the history of Classic Charter, and the company's direction as it heads into the future.

"Approximately 50 to 60 percent of our business is from repeat customers, while the majority of new customers hear about us through referrals. That tells me we are meeting the transportation

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needs of a lot of people,” he said. “It all comes down to safety and customer service, while getting people to where they want to go.

“Marketing our company used to be a lot harder in the early years, when we were smaller and not as well known. Today, we are fortunate enough to have a larger base of return customers. I would like to think we have made a good name for ourselves, and have done a good job for the people living in the Central Valley.”

As Chris and Melissa Riddington look toward the company’s future, a third generation of Riddingtons may some day help carry Classic Charter into future transportation endeavours.

“We have two teenage sons, and our oldest really enjoys working in the office. He has even gained some experience, and found success, in sales,” Riddington said. “It’s too early to tell if either

son will eventually carry the torch at Classic Charter, but it’s great to see their interest. Time will tell.”

Demand for overall bus and motorcoach transportation should continue to grow in the years and decades ahead, according to Riddington. He expects that will be true for not only the Central Valley and the entire state of California, but throughout the United States and North America.

“It remains a very good, easy and safe way for a lot of people to travel, especially with the way today’s buses and motorcoaches are manufactured. They come with a lot of comfort and technology,” Riddington said. “It also seems to me that many members of today’s younger generations find traveling in a nice bus/coach very appealing.

“Overall, I think our industry is in good shape for the future.”

Visit www.classiccharter.com for more information.

Corpus Christi RTA: Continued From Page 34

available every hour of operation. We have some officers in plain clothes and some in uniform who ride our system, helping us to make sure passengers are safe.”

Being located close to the U.S./Mexico border, there are issues to be considered such as human trafficking and illegal drugs, which are also reasons to employ highly trained, professional law enforcement personnel to ensure passenger safety, Cruz-Aedo explained.

“We have canine units that come by and check our platforms and facilities,” Cruz-Aedo said. “We have even conducted hostage negotiation training. Our riders recognize we are using every technique we can on the law enforcement side to keep them safe.”

CCRTA is also concerned about the safety of another portion of the population. While homelessness is not unique to Corpus Christi, the way CCRTA reacts to the problem is unique.

“We are compassionate, and treat all our community with dignity and respect,” Cruz-Aedo said. “In addition, we are currently working with the city of Corpus Christi and community partners with the goal of increasing public safety for the homeless community and beautifying Corpus Christi.”

Located on the Gulf Coast, Corpus Christi has been hit with several hurricanes and tropical storms over the years, including Hurricane Carla (1961), Hurricane Beulah (1967), Hurricane Celia (1970), Tropical Storm Amelia (1978), Hurricane Bret (1999) and Hurricane Harvey (2017).

While CCRTA’s emergency preparedness plan covers hurricanes and tropical storms, it also is in place to respond to other types of potential disasters.

“Our emergency preparedness plan encompasses all potential emergencies, such as the recent industrial fires in Houston (about 200 miles north),” Cruz-Aedo said.

According to news reports, there have been a series of petrochemical industry blazes this year in the Houston area.

“We have interlocal agreements with the city of Corpus Christi and Nueces County,” Cruz-Aedo said. “CCRTA’s role, as outlined in the emergency preparedness plan, is evacuation. For example, we deployed when Hurricane Harvey hit a little north of Corpus Christi.”

According to news reports, when Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas on Aug. 25, 2017, as a Category 4 hurricane, it became the country’s first major — category 3 or higher — hurricane

since Wilma hit Florida in October 2005, and the first major hurricane to strike southern Texas since Celia in 1970. Causing about \$125 billion in damage, Harvey ranks as the second-most costly hurricane to hit the U.S. mainland since 1900.

“CCRTA mobilized and provided service until we had to stop because of the wind and rain,” Cruz-Aedo said. “We hunkered down to ride out the storm. Then, we were up early the next day to begin providing transportation and mobility needs for the community, post hurricane.

“We have evacuation plans for all of the communities in our service area. In the case of an emergency, nine different evacuation plans would kick in to help evacuate the 900 square miles that we service.”

A SATISFIED HEART

While addressing the future of public transportation in the Corpus Christi area, Cruz-Aedo said it will continue to become more and more important for CCRTA to help alleviate some of the mobility issues caused by government budget constraints.

“We want to be in a position to properly respond and change with the community to meet its needs,” Cruz-Aedo said. **“I’m not one who thinks the way we have it today is going to be the way it is going to be tomorrow. Whatever we are going to experience tomorrow, I want us to be prepared to deal with the changing demographics in the community and of mobility in general.”**

Cruz-Aedo suggested that a career in public transportation would be a good choice for those seeking fulfillment in the workplace.

“If you are a student or looking for a job or wanting to change careers, take a look at your local transit agency and see some of the jobs that are available,” Cruz-Aedo said. “When I go home at the end of the day, and I know I have helped my family, my neighbor and my community by providing safe and reliable transportation, I have a satisfied heart.”

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