



IAP2 MEMBER PROFILE

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PHOTO

How long have you been in P2, and where have you worked?

I've worked in P2 my entire career -- about 20 years. I have a degree in city and regional planning from Georgia Tech and when I first got out of grad school, I was young and eager and outgoing and interested in transportation. I got a job opportunity that enabled me to leverage those skills and be involved with some of the most exciting transportation projects in the region. It was with a woman-owned firm that did P2 work in transportation -- that was our exclusive focus -- and I was involved in some projects that connected me with some of the big names in the P2

I worked there for the first four or five years of my career, and that was a great way to meet a lot of the agencies engaging in P2 in this region and I was exposed to all the different types of methods that the clients used.

Being with this firm brought other opportunities. I got engaged in some national organizations, including the Transportation Research Board (TRB) and its Public Involvement Committee. I was chair of the committee up until recently -- from 2013 to 2019.

Public Consultation always seems to be a big issue with transportation. Why do you suppose that is?

There's a legislative history in the USA, because there were times when the public wasn't engaged and P2 wasn't done effectively while infrastructure was being built. Roads or highways would go right through neighborhoods or sensitive areas without people being consulted, so there was a lot of distrust. With this industry, you can't just

do the bare minimum and “check the box”. Agencies are starting to recognize that they have to engage the public in a way that’s meaningful and that invites people to participate and develop trusting relationships -- and the expectation of the public is that agencies will follow through on commitments made during the P2 process.

What have been some big projects that you’ve enjoyed working on?

I worked on a rural and human services transit plan, which was a statewide effort. This plan was focused on serving transit-dependent populations who don’t have other means to get around. Some may be seniors, who live in rural areas and don’t have cars. Because of the nature of the areas, systems are difficult to operate and it’s not a transit-friendly environment.

The populations we engaged in this process were very appreciative of having a voice in the process. In a typical urban project P2 process, you are often talking about “another road-widening project” and people simply don’t care that much. But this group truly appreciated being asked for their input on something that would benefit them in the long run.

How did you reach out to people in the rural areas?

We worked through some of the state structures that were in place. In the State of Georgia, we have 12 Regional Commissions -- these are agencies that assist local governments on a regional basis. We worked with the staff to identify whom we should bring together and used that as a conduit to find the right people to contact.

For our techniques, we held meetings in convenient locations and also used a focus group format, where people understood the topics under discussion. We let people know ahead of time what we wanted to learn.

The big thing was, this project did not involve pre-conceived notions. Often, P2 involves “Here’s our idea - what do you think of it?” This project involved listening to what ideas might be beneficial.

I’ve also worked with Atlanta Regional Commission, updating their regional plan and community engagement plan. They have been open to new ideas, and are focused on going to where people are and using new engagement tactics, rather than following a predetermined format. It was fun to be involved in a project where innovation and creativity were welcome.

One of the projects I was involved in from early on was a reversible express toll lane on Atlanta’s “Northwest Corridor”. This project originally started when I got out of school, and at the time, express lanes were a brand new concept, so we had to do a lot of education in the community. What’s more, the project changed shape many times over

the years. At one point it was going to integrate a transit component; at another point, it became a public-private partnership. With all those changes, you can get disheartened.

My role changed, too. When I was first involved, I focused on public involvement, following National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) guidelines. I developed the original public involvement plan outlining how we would engage the public and host the public meetings and charrettes to consider the various designs. Then I moved into the environmental side as the project evolved.

It opened in 2018 after about twenty years in the planning, design, and construction phases, but people are calling it a life-changing project. So being involved in something that took so long to come to fruition and seeing the impact it's having on people's lives is truly satisfying.

Have you had a “Golden Learning Moment” -- something that went wrong, but you learned from it?

Certainly there have been lessons learned over the years ... one of the things that was a problem early on was “siloing” and not having all the right players in the room when you're engaging. Engineers don't always feel comfortable dealing with the public and don't want to address some of the issues. So what I learned was that bringing more resources to meetings and being willing to engage on topics that might be out of the scope of the immediate conversation goes a long way towards building relationships.

Successful P2 means having a long-term relationship in the community. We work a lot with MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority), and there are some parts of Atlanta where there is a history of distrust. We often have meetings about a specific project, like a transit extension, but citizens will come to the meeting and want to discuss other issues, such as service gaps. MARTA recognizes that it is important to go to any meeting prepared to talk about other topics -- to broaden their scope -- and have people on-hand to work through those issues; so they can be affected by that input even though that wasn't what the meeting was supposed to be about.

You're on the Board of IAP2 USA, but there's no chapter yet in Georgia.

We have two Georgians on the board now (Michael Bailey, in the Department of Human Services, is the other) and the future of IAP2 in Georgia is bright. We have members who have joined, along with P2 specialty firms; there's also the Centers for Disease Control and more organizations interested in being a part of IAP2. We're also working on ideas for engaging state agencies to send staff for P2 training, so I'm excited about the possibility of getting a chapter going. We're focused on planning a Skills Symposium for this fall in Atlanta if we can get past the current challenges posed by COVID-19..

How important is IAP2?

I find that having a network of professionals that have tried different things and have had lessons learned is so valuable. You need to have people to call as resources and conferences to go to where you can learn valuable information. P2 is very localized -- I

might not be the best person to lead a project in, say, Michigan where I don't know the community -- but the lessons learned are still things I can apply in my home community.

If you had anything to say to someone just getting into the P2 business ...

I would say, approach things with an open mind and an open heart. One thing I've learned over the years is that when I've been at a public meeting, and someone starts acting in a disruptive way, it is critical to be empathetic to what that person might be going through. There's a way to change the conversation in a way that benefits everyone.

You get better outcomes when you can see the different perspectives.