partners with the industry

PROFILE OF CAROLYN FLOWERS, ACTING ADMINISTRATOR AT THE FEDERAL TRANSIT ADMINISTRATION (FTA)

Interview location: Carolyn's office at the FTA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. In one word, she describes herself as "Being," adding, "fulfilling my possibilities and striving for essential completeness."

By Laura Lee Huttenbach

Carolyn Flowers, in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

How does the federal government work with individual transit agencies? There are 6,800 such agencies in the country, operating in every state and the District of Columbia. They all serve different populations, across different landscapes, under different structures, but each of them maintains a partnership with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Today I hope Carolyn Flowers, the FTA's Acting Administrator, can help me better understand how the system works. ›

fabric of the community

We are sitting in her office at the United States Department of Transportation (US DOT) headquarters, which spans two blocks in Washington, D.C., right by the Navy Yard and Nationals Park, home of the Washington Nationals baseball team. DOT includes fellow federal modal agencies like Aviation, Railroad, and Highways. Carolyn is an elegant woman, wearing a gold pantsuit and a broad smile. “I saw that you were a history major,” she tells me, revealing her research.

“Yes,” I say. “You were, too.”

“History and political science,” she says. Carolyn got her bachelor’s degree from UCLA, where she also received a Master of Business in finance and accounting. “The political science has really come in handy,” she says, glancing around the office. I ask how her history degree relates to what she’s doing today, and she tells me that knowing the backstory to a situation—“how you got to where you are at this point in time and the perspectives that people hold because of it”— is helpful in making decisions about the future.

“In transportation, we’ve seen renaissances and resurgences and now we’re at this whole

Carolyn Flowers outside the A Line Train in Denver, Colorado. (Photo used with permission from the DOT Archives.)

different place with technology,” she says, giving examples of ride sharing and programs like “First Mile, Last Mile,” which provides transportation to people from their home to a transit center. “I think we’re at this precipice in how we’re going to define and move transportation forward.”

Growing up in Los Angeles, Carolyn started using public transit as a kid. In junior high, she rode the city bus to school, except on the days she decided to walk to save her bus fare. She tells me that the bus stop was right around the corner from her house, but that “I had to make sure I got there in time because if I missed that bus, I really would have to run to school.” I ask how this shaped her early impressions of transit. “Convenience and time and frequency,” she says. “Those are the

things I remember very early on. And if you ask somebody why they take public transportation, it's about that. A consumer is looking for convenient, reliable, and safe transportation."

Few people have seen the transit world from as many perspectives as Carolyn Flowers. When I ask how she got started in a public transit career, she laughs. "Truly funny," she says. Four decades ago, fresh out of business school, she was working for a computer company, selling scanners—or, as they were called then, document imaging systems—when the company went bankrupt. One of her customers, Jerry Givens, was a deputy at the Los Angeles County Transportation Committee. As she recalls, "I had lunch with him and said, 'I want to thank you for your friendship and allowing me to come in and sell you this system. Now I need to sell myself. I need a job.'"

> *You become a jack of all trades. You're also more a fabric of the community.*

Carolyn smiles. "So that's how I got into public transportation. I didn't realize at that time that it would lead me down this path and become a passion." When she was hired, LA Metro was expanding from only one line, and her job was to do outreach to "DBE"—Disadvantaged Business Enterprises—for their participation in ongoing construction projects. Carolyn eventually moved to the financial side of LA Metro. Over the next 19 years, she climbed the corporate ladder, becoming Director of Budgets, the Deputy Executive Officer of Finance, the CAO, and the COO, where she was responsible for 2,600 vehicles in the bus fleet and a Metro Map of trains that looked like a pile of spaghetti.

In 2010, she moved to North Carolina to become Chief Executive Officer of the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS), a significantly smaller transit agency than LA Metro with a new light rail and a bus fleet of around 320. "When you're running a smaller agency, your hands are on everything," she says. "I found that I was being a COO and CEO at the same time but I was also the face for our agency in communication and marketing. And I was the person coming on the Hill to beg for the funding. You become a jack of all trades." She pauses for moment before adding cheerfully, "You're also more a fabric of the community." I ask which direction she thinks is easier to move—from bigger to smaller agency, or vice versa. "I would probably say LA to Charlotte," she says. "Being at a very large agency, you really have seen a lot of things. You may not have been able to get into them in depth, but you see a lot."

Charlotte was facing a budgeting deficit when Carolyn took over. She didn't have much time to acclimate. "I had three weeks to solve it," she recalls. In five years at CATS, Carolyn managed to balance the budgets, secure funding for a light rail extension, and begin Phase One of a streetcar line.

In January 2015, Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx appointed Carolyn to serve as FTA's Senior Adviser, where she is now Acting Administrator. "You know how you talk about art and science and using the different sides of your brain—left brain, right brain?" she asks. "Well, it's the same thing coming from the operations to regulatory side. In my opinion, you're making a flip—a 180 degree flip."

In the last two months, Carolyn has testified before two Congressional Hearings before the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The matter addressed in the hearings was safety oversight of the Washington Metro System (WMATA), which has also been the subject of conversations on the streets of DC and in national headlines.

As a result of many highly publicized safety violations at WMATA—including a fatal fire on the tracks—Congress has granted the FTA regulatory authority to oversee the safety of WMATA as well as the entire public transit industry. The FTA can now enforce national safety requirements and withhold funds to systems who fail to meet them. "Generally we work with the states to exercise the oversight," explains Carolyn. "But in this case, WMATA had a series of problems and they had not responded to past incidents going all the way back to the Fort Totten incident." The incident she's referring to occurred on June 22, 2009, when a southbound Red Line train crashed into another train stopped on the tracks in between the Takoma and Fort Totten Stations. Because of a faulty track circuit, the stopped train was invisible to the incoming train's Automatic Train Control System. Nine people, including the train operator, were killed and more than 80 passengers were injured.

2015 Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO) Women Who Move the Nation Honorees, with pictured Carolyn Flowers at the bottom left. (Used with permission from the DOT archives.)

Carolyn Flowers cutting ribbon at RTD commuter rail. (Photo used with permission from DOT archives.)

I ask what agency used to regulate the safety of Washington Metro. "The Tri-State Oversight Commission," says Carolyn. "Better known by us as the TOC" (pronounced "tock"). She explains that the commission is made up of representatives from the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. "TOC didn't have the ability to force and compel WMATA to make those corrective actions," she explains, so the FTA, in accordance with the statutory authority granted by Congress, stepped in.

On April 13, 2016, for over two hours, Carolyn, along with Metro's new general manager, Paul Wiedefeld, responded to pointed questions from a few dozen representatives. She was less than two weeks into the job as Acting Administrator at the time. She did it again on May 24. "It's very intense," says Carolyn. Representatives don't submit questions in advance, so Carolyn had to be prepared for anything.

I ask about her pre-hearing ritual, particularly what she'd eaten for breakfast. "A banana and orange juice," she says. "Potassium and sugar," though she goes light on the pour; there's no bathroom break.

"And what's going through your mind walking up to the House?" I ask.

"That I can answer the questions," she says. "That's what goes through my mind. I mean, it's intense. It's being televised. People are asking you questions, and there's more of them than you."

While Washington Metro is taking up a lot of Carolyn's bandwidth, she has many duties to fulfill as FTA Administrator. "The other part of my job is looking at our capital investment grant program," she says. "FTA is the largest grantee organization in all of the US DOT." Listing a handful of the programs, she names Capital Investment Grants, as well as grants for Transit-Oriented Development, Bus and Bus Facilities, Research, Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery, Workforce Development, and Rides to Wellness.

In December 2015, President Obama signed the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act) into law, authorizing a $61 billion investment in transit between 2016 and 2020. Carolyn considers this to be the most important recent legislation on transit. Before then, Congress had been reissuing funding one year at a time. In all, FTA fosters the development and maintenance of more than 6,000 individual transit agencies.

"When I hear the big numbers," I admit, "the billions of dollars and the huge number of transit agencies—I get a little overwhelmed." I ask if Carolyn can break the process down for me, and she obliges.

Put simply, she says, to build new infrastructure, a transit agency will come to the FTA with a proposal to receive a federal grant. "They're usually in the design and engineering phase," she says. "Generally, they've done about 30 percent of the design, and we get a concept of the project." Then come a bunch of steps—a financial plan, the "alignment" (where it's going), what kind of ridership it's going to generate, an environmental impact statement in accordance with the National Environment Policy Act, economic impact, risk assessment, questions on transit-oriented development or affordable housing. "All of those things have to be ironed out before we give you money," she says. "By the time we award, they're usually at about 60 percent of design, and that could take five or seven years." To ensure that the local agency has skin in the game, the FTA requires that the state or county come up with, at a minimum, 40 percent of the funding, which is sometimes taken from sales tax revenue. "Right now we're only giving awards that are around 50 percentage," she says, "because we're trying to stretch our dollars, too." During construction, the local dollars are used up first.

> ***"Those things have to be ironed out before we give you money."***

Most funding arrangements are partnerships between public agencies; the city or county comes up with the local share of project funds, and the federal government comes up with the other share. "You have the partnership of two public entities," she says, noting one big recent exception that was successful in Denver. "That was a P3, our first public-private partnership in the public transit industry. Phil Washington was the CEO of Denver Regional Transportation District when that happened." There, the funding came from three sources—local sales tax, a federal grant, and a consortium of companies from the private sector. Carolyn recently returned from Denver, where she attended the launch of the commuter rail that takes passengers 23 miles from the airport to downtown. "It's beautiful," she says. "I loved it."

I ask how her perception of the FTA has changed from when she was on the receiving end of grants. "When I was in the process of getting a full-funding grant agreement, I felt I was audited to death," she says. "I had a lot of consecutive audits."

Carolyn Flowers, 2016. (Photo Credit, Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

However, since she's come to the FTA, "they're trying to consolidate a lot of the oversight and do [less frequent] enhanced reviews." She's nodding her head. "That's an improvement."

As administrator, Carolyn is unique in that she had operating experience coming to the job. "It's a political appointment," she says, noting a lot of her predecessors have gone on to work in operations throughout the country at transit agencies.

On misperceptions of the FTA, she says, "I think there is the expectation that the regulator is out to get you." From where she sits, she says that's not the case. Yes, she says, the agency is responsible for compliance, but "what we're trying to be is partners with the industry."

Carolyn and I decide to finish our interview on the Metro's Green Line, on her commute home. (She says about 70 percent of the FTA employees in DC take the Metro to work.) Before we wrap up the office portion of our interview, I ask about her life outside of transit. "I have no life," she says, laughing. She remarks that at one point she thought she would take up golf. "For the past six years, those clubs have been sitting in my garage, rotting," she says, shaking her head. But after some prodding, she admits that she's kidding. "I love going to plays and art museums, I think that's the history part of me," she says. Her favorite play at the moment is Hamilton. "It's much more interesting than watching a movie or television because the actors are out there right in front of you, and they don't have the opportunity for retakes. They have to be at the peak of their craft."

I ask about Carolyn's friends, and she says that most of them also work in transit. The industry, she says, tends to employ the types of people she holds in high esteem. "There are loads of women in the industry that I've admired," she says. She's

Carolyn Flowers. (Photo used with permission by the DOT archives.)

met them through various leadership programs run by the American Public Transportation Association and the ENO Center for Transportation, a think tank that promotes policy innovation and provides professional development opportunities to transit professionals. At the APTA annual conference, Carolyn tells me, a group of her colleagues get together for what they call "Diva Dinners." When I ask for more details, she just says it's a networking dinner, before casually adding, "There is some silliness because we wear colorful boas."

For the trip home, Carolyn slips out of her heels and into flats. I ask if she has any interesting relics in her office. From behind a couch pillow, she pulls out a long, narrow

knit doll, which is called a "Dammit Doll," given to her by a friend. Carolyn reads aloud the rhymed instructions on the front of the doll: *Whenever things don't go so well. And you want to hit the wall and yell. Here's a little dammit doll that you can't do without. Just grasp it firmly by the legs. And find a place to slam it. And as you whack it against something, say, "Dammit. Dammit. Dammit."* She demonstrates for me, whacking the doll against her desk. "You have to have a place to let it all go," she says. "In your career, you do have some challenging people you have to deal with."

Fortunately, in the transit field, she doesn't have to make too much use of the Dammit Doll. Carolyn genuinely loves her job. In many ways, she is the perfect advocate for workforce development; she stumbled upon a career in transit because she needed a way to pay rent. "I really had no idea of the opportunities," she says. "Basically, the image of transit is the frontline worker. What people usually see is the bus driver, the train operator, or the station agents. That's what they think all of transit is. They don't know there's a plethora of jobs and opportunities in planning, construction, civil rights, engineering, public affairs, or marketing . . . You can do almost anything."

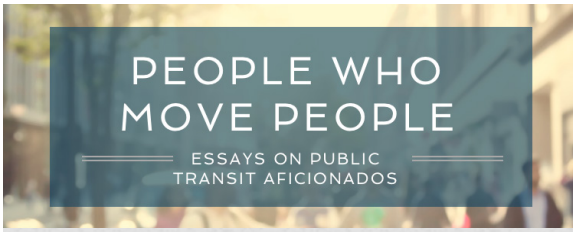
> ***You have to have a place to let it all go, she says. In your career, you do have some challenging people you have to deal with.***

We exit the US DOT building and walk along a stretch of road known as "Transportation Way," the sidewalk lined with relics from various transportation modes—a railroad sculpture, a boat propeller, airplanes, a truck tire, three antique gas pumps. As we approach the Navy Yard Metro Station, Carolyn says she hopes we ride in a 7000-series car, "the brand new cars," she explains. She has a preferred seat in the car as well, and generally rides backwards, because in the event of a crash, she says, "our safety guys have said it's safer to ride backwards."

I ask her what she believes is the greatest compliment she can receive about her work. "That you're doing your job," she replies. "And that you're doing a good job." She says that we all work to be fulfilled, but the perception of public servants is low. They "are usually denigrated," she says. "People don't think we have any major value." But she is confident that in her past and present career, she contributes to the public good. "I can look out the window every day," she says. "I can go in any city and see this service being delivered

and know that we contributed to people getting to work, to medical appointments, and to recreation. When we ride transit, we know what we've done." ■

Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach's first book is "The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General" (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.



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