

trying to climb a mountain

PROFILE OF JEFF MEILBECK, CEO AND GENERAL MANAGER
OF THE NORTHERN ARIZONA INTERGOVERNMENTAL
PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY (NAIPTA)

Interview location: Criollo Latin Kitchen

How we got there: On NAIPTA's Mountain Line bus

In one word, he describes himself as "Strategic."

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Jeff Meilbeck, staying out of the rain at a bus stop with Ken Van Doorne the operator in Flagstaff, Arizona. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

When Jeff Meilbeck was in sixth grade, he went to the top floor of his Chicago middle school and looked out the window. “I remember closing my eyes and saying, When I open my eyes, those [buildings] are going to be mountains,” Jeff recalls. We are sitting in his office at the Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority (NAIPTA), in Flagstaff, where he is CEO and General Manager. >

have a vision

When sixth-grade Jeff opened his eyes, there was still only skyline without a mountain in sight. “And I was like, Well, that’s not gonna work.” He left Chicago at 17, to study Outdoor Recreation at Southern Illinois University—the farthest he could get away from the city while still paying in-state tuition. He wanted to be an Outward Bound instructor, and the curriculum suited him perfectly—he took courses on expedition leadership, campground development, and canoeing. “I’m serious, I took canoeing,” he says, laughing.

In 1986, Jeff took his undergraduate degree to the forests of British Columbia, and then to Denali National Park in Alaska, where he worked as a park ranger. “I show this to people sometimes,” he says, getting up from the table. He walks to a picture frame hanging on the wall next to his desk, and I follow. In the bottom right corner of the frame, there’s Jeff in his mid-twenties, with long, brown, shaggy hair and a full beard, wearing a khaki park ranger uniform. “I probably smelled like patchouli,” he adds.

Today Jeff is clean-shaven, wearing frameless spectacles and a grey suit. His cell phone sits in a holster on his leather belt. If a grizzly



Jeff Meilbeck, when he was 26 years old in 1991, as a park ranger in Denali National Park.

came strolling into the office, Jeff—looking at him now—is an unlikely person I’d pick to protect us, but he is definitely the most qualified. “Yeah,” says Jeff, studying the photo. “Times change.”

After five years as a ranger and outdoor guide, he landed in Flagstaff. “How did you come here?” I ask. “My windshield wipers broke,” he replies. “I was driving west, and I thought, Well maybe I’ll try Phoenix”—knowing it was a desert—“and from Phoenix, I discovered Flagstaff.” Jeff was enamored by the mountain town (that actually gets a lot of rainfall and snow) and never left. He leans back in his chair and chuckles at his youthful decision-making. “Being so responsible now,” he says, “I’ve forgotten that part of myself.”

In 1991, Jeff enrolled in Northern Arizona University, eventually earning a master's degree in Public Administration. "I wanted to effect change with environmental policy and government action," he says. "Just taking a few kids up the mountain didn't feel satisfying enough to have an impact, and I felt like understanding how decisions are made and how policy is implemented would have a bigger impact." To him, the connection between public transit and the environment was obvious. For example, "To the extent that we don't have to build wider roads and use real estate for more parking, we are saving land for other purposes," he says.

"Well, I'll bet those few kids that you took up a mountain are very glad that's how you started," I say.

He nods. "I know it changed my life when somebody did it for me," he says. I ask what skills he learned as an outdoor guide that he still applies. "I'm glad you asked that," he says, "because with outdoor recreation, I worked with juvenile delinquents and with gifted students. And the point with any group is—if we're trying to climb a mountain together or canoe across the river—everybody is focused on that goal. One person is maybe the strongest physically, and they can carry the most weight. Another person maybe has a great sense of humor, and they keep the mood light. Maybe another person is great at starting fires. But the point is, we all have to work together to make it happen. If we focus on each other's strengths and our shared vision—and we're out there enjoying ourselves, working toward something—we understand the purpose." A content expression comes across his face. "I like doing that in organizations, too."

Jeff's entry into the world of public transit came four years after grad school by way of the classifieds when he saw that the local transit agency was hiring a project coordinator. Back then, there was no NAIPTA. Instead, Coconino County ran Pine Country Transit, which had three "meandering" bus routes that carried about 100,000 riders per year. "I should show you the building I was in," says Jeff. "It was an abandoned gas station. A large van wouldn't even fit inside. It's really amazing how much stuff has changed." Last year, for comparison, NAIPTA moved two million people in Flagstaff.

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For the agency's growth and evolution, Jeff credits the county officials, who he describes as "visionary." People outside Coconino County, like the students at Northern Arizona University and the residents of Flagstaff, needed transportation, too, so together they—Coconino County, Northern Arizona University, and greater Flagstaff—created NAIPTA. I ask when Pine Country became NAIPTA. "It was officially formed in 2006," says Jeff, "but it was five years of getting legislation passed and all the different partners to sign on." When NAIPTA finally came into existence, Jeff was so relieved and



Jeff Meilbeck.

happy that he took his wife and two daughters to Disneyland.

Taking a sip from his coffee mug, Jeff realizes that he didn't offer me something to drink when I arrived. "Sorry," he says, "Would you like a coffee?" It's just after nine in the morning, and caffeine sounds good. Walking to the kitchen, Jeff pauses in front of a wall covered in pieces of laminated paper, the sum of which forms a rectangle. On the left side, there are four categories, each with one word, written in red with a blue circle around it: Facilities, Operations, NAIPTA, and Fleet. Along the top are the months of the year, from April 2016 until October 2017. Each square of paper in the middle has a goal with bullet points and boxes, some already checked.

For himself and his team, Jeff wants clear, tangible reminders of what they've accomplished and what's still left to do. "Every year we come up with different objectives," he explains, "and everybody sees how they're a part of getting something done."

After Jeff pours my coffee from the pot in the kitchen, we return to his office. The shelf behind me is full of books, and I ask what he likes to read. "Here's one," he says, pointing to a book by Markus Buckingham and Donald Clifton called "Now Discover your Strengths." I've never heard of it, and Jeff explains, "The point of the book is you focus on people's strengths ... because if you're operating in your strengths, you're doing the best you can, and you're having a fun time." He asks if I've ever taken a survey to determine my strength. I shake my head. "I'm guessing you have woo, Laura Lee." Someone with woo, he says, connects easily with people. I'm flattered by his assessment. "There are three people in this organization that have that," he says. "They

Focus on people's strengths because if you're operating in your strengths you're doing the best you can and you're having a fun time.



Jeff Meilbeck and Ken Van Doorne in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

just love connecting with people. I'm actually not one of those people. Other people are really adaptable. I'm strategic. I mean, if somebody told me I need to go into the dispatch office when there's chaos out in the street and be adaptable and make something happen, I'd lose my mind. But if you want me to put together a strategy so that we don't have those situations in the future, I'm all in. So there's that aspect of teamwork which is really gratifying."

"It seems so basic to focus on people's strengths," I say. "But a lot of us are focused on weaknesses—in ourselves and in other people.

We look for what's missing instead of what's there."

"That's what we're trained to do all through school," replies Jeff. Like, for example, a parent will criticize a student for not being good at math. Instead of focusing on top scores in English or chemistry, "They'll tell you to get up your math score," continues Jeff. "We're just indoctrinated in that."

A humble intellectual and brilliant communicator, Jeff cites one other book that has informed his leadership style, Steven

Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." "That's kind of the most basic management textbook," he says. Specifically, he likes Covey's point to "have a vision. Begin with the end in mind. Seek first to understand. And really focus on win-win." You create win-win situations, he says, by concentrating on shared objectives. "Sometimes you go into situations lose-lose," he says. "I could say, 'I'm a transit guy. I'm not a road guy. Therefore, I want all money going into transit.' A person focused on roads could say, 'No, I'm fighting with you. I want more money for roads.' Well, the win-win is, 'Why do you want roads? Why do I want transit? What do we have in common? How can we both get our needs met?'"

He applies this principle when he seeks funding from different sources whom he knows have different priorities. Opening a binder on the table, Jeff shows me a line graph that charts the average cost per ride and the number of riders over time. In the last two decades, ridership has risen while the cost per trip has fallen. "So if you're an environmentalist, you're going, 'Wow, great! We went up to two million people,'" observes Jeff. "And if you're a businessperson, you're saying, 'Wow, great! We went from six bucks a person [for the total trip cost] to \$2.50 a trip.'" In order to impress people on all fronts, he has to find the right statistic. "We're managing it from both sides," says Jeff. "Everybody sees something they can benefit in." He turns to another page in the binder and tells me that in 2008, the leadership at NAIPTA wanted to expand services, but they needed voters in Flagstaff to sign off on the proposal. Two years earlier, Flagstaff voters had voted against doubling the size of NAIPTA, so this

time Jeff tried a new strategy. He formed a citizens group, the "Review Commission," of eight leaders in Flagstaff representing different perspectives of leaders in the community. Members ranged from an environmentalist to homebuilder to a car salesman. "How did you find the eight leaders?" I ask.

"I went to about 20 people and said, 'Who are the three most influential people in the community?'" recalls Jeff. When eight names kept coming up, he knew those were opinions he wanted to hear. "It's really important to not just get people who are gonna do what you want," says Jeff. "You gotta get people who are going to say what they think. Then you have to listen. That's the hardest part."

***Which mountain do
you want to climb
and how are we
gonna do this?***

He says that NAIPTA brought the eight community leaders into one room and asked them, "Which mountain do you want to climb, and how are we gonna do this?" The group identified five issues to address, and decided to let the community decide with its votes. At the next election, five questions were listed on the ballot: Should NAIPTA get hydroelectric buses? Do you want to have a route going through campus? Do you want more frequent buses? Do you want buses in more places? Do you want to continue the Mountain Line service?

At first, Jeff thought this was a horrible idea. “I thought, No, I don’t want to do that. That’s just stupid. Why would we send five questions?” But remembering that he had failed in 2006, he decided to trust the process. “So we did it,” he continues. “We sent these five questions to the voters, and they all passed at supermajority levels—above 66 percent approval for transit.” I ask if this is a common practice amongst transit agency. “It’s a very common thing for transit to be funded with a local sales tax,” says Jeff, “so we went to voters like a lot of communities do and asked them if they wanted to tax themselves to provide a transit service.” “The difference is, we sent five questions and most people only send one.”

That year, NAIPTA got its mandate directly from its constituency and focused on meeting the five new objectives. This year, they’re going back to the voters with more questions for a ten-year review. “This makes it easy,” says Jeff, handing me a copy of what they intend to give voters. “People say, ‘What does transit do?’ In a matter of minutes, I can say, ‘Here’s what we set out to do, here’s what we’ve done, and here’s where we’re headed. It’s all on one page. I think it builds trust and helps people understand how we’re trying to help.” He smiles, extracting another piece of paper. “I have a piece of evidence for that. Just in April, we did a survey of registered likely voters, and the question was, ‘What’s your impression of Mountain Line?’ Eighty-six percent had a favorable impression of the system, compared to 42 percent for the rest of the state. So we’ve definitely been able to connect with the community here.”

I ask if he has any tips for other agencies. “Sure, that Steven Covey thing of ‘seek first to understand,’” he says. “You’ve gotta listen to the

community. Give them what they want.”

We are waiting for the Mountain Line bus when Jeff notices I don’t have a jacket. “It’s going to rain,” he says. It’s also windy, and I’m cold. “Let me get you a jacket from my car,” he says. I worry about missing the bus, and he tells me that he’s already checked the app—Real Time Arrival—and knows exactly where the bus is. He says he has at least five minutes.

He returns from the parking lot with a navy windbreaker and points to the breast pocket, where “America’s Best Transit System” is embroidered. He tells me it’s a memento from the American Public Transportation Association Award in 2013. Our bus pulls up as it starts raining hard. Jeff and the driver, Ken, greet each other warmly.

Besides fixed route buses, NAIPTA runs a paratransit line as well as vanpools for the Greater Flagstaff region. I ask Jeff if he had experience serving the disabled community. “Well,” he says, pausing. “I took the position in 1997, and in 1998, my oldest daughter, Lauren, was born three months early.” Today Lauren struggles with cerebral palsy, which comes with severe physical and intellectual disabilities. “I hate describing her that way,” continues Jeff, “because she’s so beautiful. It’s like describing the Mona Lisa as a piece of canvas with twelve ounces of paint.” He shows me a selfie of the two of them together, and she is glowing. Jeff tells me that Lauren loves riding the bus. “She cracks up,” he says. Today, providing mobility to people whose

physical or intellectual limitations make them depend on paratransit, is “a very close personal and professional connection.”

We get off downtown and Jeff tells me about one of Flagstaff’s claims to fame. “Have you seen *Forrest Gump*?” I nod. “You know the scene where he’s running down the street and steps in dog crap?” I nod again. “That was filmed right here, on this street.”

In town and at lunch, everyone is super friendly—like they could high-five me at any moment. We order “smashed avocado” with chips. I’m still curious about his experience as a ranger and ask for scary animal encounters. “Just seeing a big bear and praying it wasn’t going to come towards me,” he says. “There’s a lot of grizzly in Denali.”

“What, besides pray, should I do if a bear

attacks me?” I ask.

“It depends on the type of bear,” he replies. If it’s a black bear, he recommends that I fight back. If it’s a grizzly, I shouldn’t make eye contact but put my arms out to the side like a zombie and slowly back away. If it attacks, I should play dead. “That’s one thing I liked about Arizona,” he says, “because I could run through the forest.” With Alaska’s thick, dense underbrush, he never knew when he might surprise a grizzly. “But there’s not that many bears in Arizona,” he says. “Certainly no grizzly bears.” He dips a chip in avocado. “And none on our buses.” I laugh. Jeff’s dry humor creeps up the more time you spend with him. “I’ve never been attacked by a grizzly on a bus,” he repeats sagely.

He asks me about my impression of transit



Jeff Meilbeck, goofing around with his colleagues, under a bus.

professionals, and I say that, uniformly, they have been generous, kind people who are trying to serve their community in a positive way. Jeff isn't surprised. "Somebody that does marketing for us," he says. "She used to work in the tourism industry, and she said what she loves about transit is that everybody shares ideas. We all work together, because we're not competing for customers. We're trying to do as much as we can for the people in our community. Whereas if you're in tourism, someone who's looking at Albuquerque or Santa Fe might also be looking at Flagstaff." To learn from others, he believes it's just as helpful to talk about what hasn't worked in an agency as what has worked. "It's important to talk about the mistakes," he says. "Sometimes you learn more from failure than success."

I ask about misperceptions of transit, and he answers quickly. "I think the general public thinks that it's the only service that's subsidized by the government." He points out the window. "In fact, that parking space is paid for by the government. That road is paid for by the government—that sidewalk. But since you don't pay a fee, it's like, Oh the roads are free . . . but transportation is needed to connect people, and it has a rap of being this subsidized system," he says. He shakes his head, adding, "Airports are subsidized."

Soon Jeff looks at his watch. "I'm worried about you making your flight," he says. It's just before noon, and my plane leaves out of Phoenix—some 2.5 hours away—at 4pm. We take the Mountain Line back to headquarters; Ken, our driver from earlier, is still at the wheel. I notice on Jeff's blue tie there's a silver pin

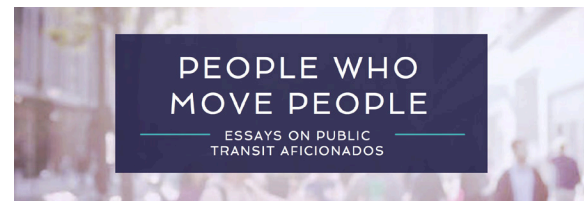
with a bear paw, and I ask about it. At first he responds truthfully—that there is no story, and he can't remember where he bought it. When he sees I'm disappointed with the answer, he changes directions. "Okay, the real story is that I had to kill a bear once," he says. "And I made this pin from its claws."

I smile. "I won't check your sources on that one," I say.

"Good," replies Jeff with a straight face. "Because the bear is dead." ■



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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