

infrastructure evangelist

PROFILE OF PHIL WASHINGTON, CEO OF LA METRO

Interview location:

Metro Headquarters in Los Angeles and a sushi restaurant in Little Tokyo

How we got there: by Metro

*When asked to describe himself in one word, he said,
“Chicago,” then added, “South Side.”*

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Phil Washington, in front of Los Angeles Metro's Union Station, in June 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

The man who runs public transit in Los Angeles—the biggest county in the nation, with 88 cities and over 10 million people—grew up in the projects of Chicago's South Side. With five sisters and a father who left the family before he was born, Phil Washington couldn't be a kid for long. "I saw first hand how the lack of transportation services really impacts lives," says Phil. "The buses ran every thirty minutes, and that was our lifeline to the metropolitan area—jobs, school, healthcare." His mother worked 12- or 14-hour shifts in town, taking the bus to work and back. "And if she missed that last bus," recalls Phil, "sometimes she didn't make it home and had to stay with a friend."

thinking about community

From day one, Phil was thinking about a community's infrastructure. "Of course we weren't calling it infrastructure," he says. He only knew he was examining the facilities around him, noting their flaws. "I grew up in apartments with asbestos," says Phil. "That's never left me."

Today Phil is telling me his story in the conference room at LA Metro's headquarters, where he became CEO in March 2015. Twenty-five floors below us, trains and subways are pulling in and out of Union Station. Big glass windows overlook the city, which today has a blanket of smoke and smog resting on buildings to our west.

Phil didn't enter the world of transit straight out of the Chicago Housing Projects. Instead, when he was eighteen, freshly expelled from high school, he enlisted in the Army, where he eventually would serve 25 years. Early on, one of Phil's drill sergeants told him something he's never forgotten. "He said that he should be able to put me in any job within that unit and I should be able to do that job proficiently within 90 days," recalls Phil. Since then, 90 days has been his target learning curve for any new task.



Metro CEO Phil Washington speaks at the annual meeting of the American Public Transportation Association in Los Angeles in Sept. 2016. (Photo credit: LA Metro.)

Near the end of his time in the Army, at his duty station in Denver, Phil began to think about his future. One day he saw an ad in the classifieds for an assistant general manager position at Denver's Regional Transportation District (RTD). A week later, RTD's CEO, Cal Marsella, offered Phil the job. "The problem was," explains Phil, "I still had ten months to go in the military." He called his good friend Larry Strickland, a fellow Sergeant Major, at the Pentagon, and Larry was able to cut a few months off his service. When Cal heard the predicament, he told Phil not to worry. "We'll wait for you," said Cal. Ten years later, when Cal retired as CEO, he passed the reins to Phil.

“The reason I’m telling you this story,” says Phil, “Is that if those two men hadn’t assisted in my transition, I never would’ve been in transportation.” He leans back in his chair, regarding them in silence for a moment. “A year and a half later on 9/11, Larry Strickland was killed at the Pentagon,” says Phil. “And Cal Marsella passed away about three months ago.”

I ask how he has applied the lessons he learned in the military in his transit career. For one, he says, the military helped him come to value diversity. “In decision making,” he explains, “if you have all the same kinds of people sitting in the room, you end up with not very good decisions.” To make decisions, Phil uses an exercise he learned from General Colin Powell, called a “Sit-Rep,” which stands for Situation Report.

He describes a sit-rep like this: “You have everyone in the room—young people, seasoned people—and you lay out what you know about the

situation and then you ask for input.” He cautions me not to begin with the most senior person in the room, “because then everybody follows that individual,” he says. Instead, start with the junior people of lower rank and ask them for everything they know about the situation. “Some of the biggest decisions that I have made in both the military and transportation is through sit reps.”

To elaborate, Phil goes to the dry erase board at the front of the room and uncaps a black marker, writing in big letters, $P = 40-70$. “P,” says Phil, “is probability of success,” and the numbers represent the percentage of information that you want to have about a particular situation in order to make an informed decision. “If I have between 40 and 70 percent of the information on any issue, then I should be able to make a decision,” continues Phil, attributing the concept again to General Powell. “If I have less than 40 percent, then I don’t have enough information. If I’m waiting to get more than 70 percent, then I’m usually what we call OBE, or ‘Overcome by Events.’” In other words, by postponing action for too long, the situation changes, and the decision becomes irrelevant.

To reach the sweet spot of information he needs to make an informed decision, he does sit-reps. “It all ties back into diversity of thought,” says Phil. The more diverse the room, the more information you can extract, though he acknowledges that information alone doesn’t make the decision. “You still have to go with your gut,” says Phil. “Wisdom is tied to that.”

The military, then, taught him tactical skills as well as the value of diversity, both of which inform his work today, but he wasn’t always confident this would be the case. “You can ask anyone that’s

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been in the military for a significant amount of time, and the biggest concern will be, *Are my skills transferrable to the civilian sector?*” says Phil. “I was concerned about that, too.” While his job no longer requires him to know the ins and outs of missile defense, the military taught Phil how to make and execute good decisions. “So the transferrable thing is leadership,” he says. “That’s what you bring to a different industry.”

Phil thinks of himself as an “infrastructure evangelist,” and, *man*, can he preach. Just last week, he tells me, the Board of Directors at LA Metro approved a new ballot measure for November “We’re talking about \$120 billion over a 40-year period,” says Phil. “If that happens, we will become the infrastructure capital of the world.”

We’re standing in front of the enormous map of Los Angeles that takes up most of one wall in the conference room. He points out a few of the projects already in progress, funded by Measure R—a half-cent sales tax approved by voters

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in 2008. “That’s our new service to Santa Monica,” he says, showing me the Red Line, which opened this past May. Next he taps a station on the Gold Line. “That’s what I catch every day,” he says.

He runs a finger along the Purple Line Extension, which is in the early stages of construction. “This line is very important,” he says, “because if we get the Olympics, the Athletes’ Village and some of the events will be out there. So you’ve got to have that line open.” Over the next few years, he hopes that Union Station, below us, will become like a “Second Downtown,” he says, “but we’re not there yet.”

When we sit down at the conference table, I ask what drew him to Los Angeles. “The potential to impact the lives of county residents is greater here than anyplace else in the country,” he says, reminding me of its 10.1 million residents. “I couldn’t pass that up.” He has high expectations for LA Metro. Currently, between 7 and 10 percent of the population uses transit to get around. “I want to see that go to 25,” says Phil. “It’s not gonna be overnight, but I think we’ll get there.”

I confess to Phil that when I told people I was writing a story about public transit in Los Angeles, several didn’t even know it existed. The only LA narrative they knew was of traffic and smog. Phil smiles knowingly. “There was a long time that folks out here didn’t even know there was a subway,” he says. “This is car country.” He thinks it’s a story common across the American West. “These Western cities are struggling with their public transit identity,” he says. “In the cowboy movies, everybody rode



Metro CEO Phil Washington is interviewed following a media and VIP ride on the Gold Line extension to Azusa in February 2016. (Photo credit: LA Metro.)

up with their own horse, strapped it to the pole, and went inside. It was one horse, one person. Hardly anybody rode the stagecoach.” He says the people in Southern California have a vastly different opinion on transit from those in the Northeast. “But it’s changing, and it’s exciting to watch that change.”

There’s one element, however, that he warns me I can’t neglect to mention in a discussion on building infrastructure. “The thing that worries me when I’m talking about these big plans is a qualified workforce,” he says. “The people side of this is equally important.” He points to the window, directing my attention to the train tracks below. “To maintain these tracks,” he says, “I need track maintainers.” The problem, he explains, is that he can’t just go to a career

center at a four-year college and recruit people with those skills, because nobody there is graduating with a degree in track maintenance. “People don’t even think about this,” says Phil, “but we don’t have enough track maintainers. That’s just one example.” In order to grow a qualified work force, Phil believes transit agencies need to start working with technical institutions to create their own curriculums. Or perhaps, he suggests, they should create their own transit university.

On that front, he’s already made progress. “One of the things that was important to me when I was Chair of APTA [American Public Transportation Association],” he says, “was to determine the hardest-to-

fill positions in this industry.” To do this, he wrote a letter to transit agency CEOs asking the question, “What are your top five hardest-to-fill positions?” The responses revealed that almost everyone was in the same boat; the industry was short on bus and rail car mechanics/technicians, rail signal maintainers, traction power maintainers, track maintainers, and route planners. This shortage, Phil predicts, will hold back development. “And we can’t ship in labor,” he says. “We have to get [our own] folks ready.”

I ask how he intends to get young people excited about working in transit. “When we recruit young people,” he says, “the focus shouldn’t be on a job but a career pathway. You *start* here, but can go anywhere in the country or world with these skills.” He faults the industry itself for not communicating the diversity of opportunities available. “We’ve got three or four hundred disciplines in this building alone,” he says, rattling off positions in marketing, law, accounting, and urban planning. The potential for upward mobility within an agency—or between cities—should be appealing to a young work force.

To get a sense of what drew Phil himself to the industry, I ask if he has a hero of infrastructure. In response, he tells me a story about Dwight Eisenhower. “In 1919,” he says, “Eisenhower was a 21-year-old Second Lieutenant.” That year, the United States Army convened a cross-country military convoy to prove its own power and show the public that tanks and jeeps could traverse our entire nation. With a great deal

of fanfare—“you know, a big parade, balloons and all this crap,” explains Phil—the convoy left from Washington, D.C. “Well, they got about fifty miles out and everything broke down,” he says, “because the roads were in such terrible condition.” At the time, young Eisenhower wasn’t in a position to do much about the roads, but he never forgot that convoy incident. Eventually, as President in 1956, he created the Interstate Highway System. “So sometimes

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you’re not in the position to do anything about infrastructure,” says Phil, referencing Eisenhower’s experience on broken-down roads and of his own in apartments filled with asbestos. “But when you have an opportunity to impact change, you must do it.”

Phil wipes his forehead with a handkerchief as we await our train on the platform of LA Metro’s Union Station. It’s about ninety degrees out, and muggy. “I’ll have to get used to not having

four seasons here,” he says. “I kind of like winter.” We ride one stop to Little Tokyo, where we walk underneath colorful paper lanterns and past stores with anime figures in the windows. Phil points out the Metro’s construction projects in the area. He says he regrets that the construction is negatively impacting the local businesses but notes that they’ve created a

been enjoying a new regional commuter line that runs from Union Station Downtown to the airport. In addition to convenience, the city now has better air quality, traffic, transit-oriented development and a shot at hosting world-class events and conferences. (In May’s *Politico* Magazine, an article about the project is entitled “[The Train that Saved Denver](#).”)



Metro CEO Phil Washington. (Photo credit LA Metro.)

business interruption fund, to offset losses to affected shops and restaurants.

Over sushi, I ask Phil to tell me more about his time in Denver. His 16 years at RTD have made him into a legend of the transit world, and I’ve heard about Phil’s impact on the city personally from friends who live there. The distance from the city to the airport used to be seen as a huge drawback, but as of this past April, Denver residents have

But in the economic recession of 2007-08, the whole project almost fell apart. To fund the \$2.2 billion-dollar initiative, Phil explains, RTD had been relying on a grant from the federal government as well as sales tax revenue that the voters had approved on the ballot. “Well, if the economy goes down, you start spending less money, right?” he asks rhetorically. The revenue they’d predicted from the sales tax didn’t materialize. Unless they wanted to delay the



Metro CEO Phil Washington, left, and Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas at the grand opening of the Expo Line extension to Santa Monica in May 2016. (Photo credit LA Metro.)

project by a decade, they needed to come up with an alternative source of funding.

Under Phil's guidance, RTD decided to turn to the private sector in what is called a P3, or public-public-private partnership—the only one of its kind to date. (The two “publics” refer to the federal and state governments, respectively.) By uniting the three sectors in a common goal, RTD was able to obtain the \$486 million needed to begin construction. The money itself came from the private sector, which RTD would eventually pay back.

“So it's like a loan?” I ask.

“Kind of like a loan,” says Phil. “With a profit margin in exchange for the risk they're taking and the acceleration of

the project. Plus they're operating and maintaining.” He tells me the main thing to understand is that he believes transit agencies today “have to look at all delivery methods,” including funding from the private sector. “If we're going to build the infrastructure in this country,” he continues, “it cannot all wait on the volatile nature and trickle of sales tax revenues, which go up and down with the economy.”

Taking a new approach doesn't come without its detractors. “I started getting all kinds of calls from people all over the country, saying, ‘Go ahead and kill the program. You're never gonna be able to do a P3,’” recalls Phil. “The project in Denver would not have happened if we listened to the naysayers.”

History, he continues, provides us with a lot

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of examples of big infrastructure projects that almost collapsed before they took off. “Think of the Louisiana Purchase,” he says. “I like to ask people if they’ve ever heard of Fisher Ames.” I haven’t heard of Fisher Ames, and Phil assures me that’s normal. “He was the guy that stood up and advised Thomas Jefferson not to purchase the Louisiana Territory,” explains Phil, explaining that Ames’s concerns were with ill-defined borders and the fact that “\$15 million was too much to pay for half the United States,” says Phil. He’s glad to know that Ames’s voice has been lost to history.

I tell Phil that I’m surprised he left Denver a year before the first train left Union Station for the airport, but he shrugs. “I went back for the opening,” he says. “But it’s not important if I’m there. What’s important was that we started this thing, and it opened. And it opened on time and under budget. It’s all about getting it done and not worrying about who takes the credit.” After the success in Denver, he was

ready to build somewhere else, and that’s when he got a call from Los Angeles.

I ask whether he plans to put together another P3 in Los Angeles, but he won’t promise anything. “When I got here, I came with this reputation of the P3 guy,” says Phil, chuckling. “It’s not something that can or should be done for every project ... but if we pass this initiative in November, there will be 18 projects in the first 15 years. *Megaprojects*. Guess what, I’m looking at every delivery method there is.”

Right before we ask for the check, I ask Phil how he’s become so effective at leading groups of very different individuals to achieve a common goal. “You lead by example,” he says, “and you follow through. Leadership is 95 percent follow-through. The question is, *Can we as leaders get people to think outside of their current issues?*”

In Los Angeles, he is hopeful. “What we are struggling with in this country sometimes is people want instant gratification,” he observes. “They want infrastructure built in their four years of office. But infrastructure takes longer than a four-year term of office. Our infrastructure forefathers understood that, but they went ahead and got it started. I think our leaders here [in Los Angeles] realize that.” For them to have approved a \$120 billion ballot measure “knowing that all the projects won’t be built in their terms of office,” says Phil, “They have shown

tremendous foresight. I think they should be lauded for that.”

To illustrate his philosophy on leadership, Phil relies, again, on a historical anecdote. “You know the story of the four-minute mile,” he says. For years and years, nobody thought it was possible to run a mile in under four minutes. But in 1954, Roger Bannister ran one in three minutes and 59 seconds. “Then the next year, about ten other people did it,” notes Phil. “I mean, how is that possible?” Leadership, Phil believes, lies in getting people to have faith in the impossible. He recalls the words of General Powell. “He used to always say, ‘Optimism is a force multiplier.’” A leader pursuing a goal must persist, believe in and inspire his crew in his unwavering belief that the goal is achievable. That attitude of optimism will trickle down and become contagious. Slowly, to the group, the goal will become tangible, attainable, and suddenly success becomes an obvious outcome, a given. Phil smiles at me. “That’s how you get folks to do the impossible.” ■



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.

