

Leadership and Management in Engineering

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR

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Washington State's I-405 Project: Women in Industry Leadership

DIANA GIRALDO, P.E., M.ASCE

ABSTRACT: Within the engineering profession, women have traditionally been in the minority, especially in management and leadership roles. In Washington State, however, three women engineers, Denise Cieri, Stacy Trussler, and Wendy Taylor, lead a multibillion-dollar roadway design and construction project to ease congestion and improve traffic flow on the state's second-most-traveled corridor, I-405. This paper provides excerpts from interviews with Cieri, Trussler, and Taylor in which they discuss the factors that influenced their successful careers and lives. In addition, Mr. Kim Henry, the Eastside Corridor project director, describes what it has been like for him to work with these three women.

Within the engineering profession, women have traditionally been in the minority, especially in management and leadership roles. In Washington State, however, three women engineers lead one of the largest roadway design and construction projects in the state. Denise Cieri, Stacy Trussler, and Wendy Taylor (Figure 1) have bridged the gender leadership gap to lead this multibillion-dollar program. This paper provides excerpts from interviews with Cieri, Trussler, and Taylor in which they discuss the factors that influenced their successful careers and lives. In addition, Mr. Kim Henry, the Eastside Corridor project director, describes what it has been like for him to work with these three women.

THE PROJECT

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and HNTB Corporation are working to ease congestion

and improve traffic flow on the state's second-most-traveled corridor, I-405 (Figure 2). Since 2002, HNTB has collaborated with WSDOT to develop a fully integrated team with one common goal in mind: delivery of improvements to the I-405 corridor. Funding for these improvements soon followed when the Washington state legislature allocated \$1.7 billion from gas tax revenue toward congestion relief projects within the corridor. The team's strategy has been to build groups of projects that directly address the worst congestion chokepoints first, coordinating all transportation modes into a working system (Figure 3). This 30-mile economic lifeline carries 800,000 vehicles each day and millions of dollars worth of cargo that is shipped through the Port of Seattle. The redesigned I-405 will offer the following improvements:

- Two additional lanes in each direction;
- A new bus rapid transit line with stations and expanded



Figure 1. Left to right: Wendy M. Taylor, Stacy C. Trussler, and Denise A. Cieri

transit centers, increasing local transit service by up to 50%;

- Improved key arterials;
- Capacity for an additional 110,000 car trips per day;
- Reduced traffic delays, anticipated to save more than 13 million hours per year, or an average of 40 hours per user;
- Travel time savings valued at \$569 million per year;
- Reduced accident savings of \$42 million a year;
- 1,700 new van pools—a 100% increase;
- 5,000 new park-and-ride spaces;
- New pedestrian-bicycle crossings;
- Enhanced freight mobility; and
- Economic benefits of new construction.

So far, five completed capacity improvement projects are open to traffic on I-405, and two projects are under construction. Two additional projects will be under contract by 2011. All funded projects will be complete by 2014, 11 years after initial funding began.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS

Denise A. Cieri, P.E.

At Work

Denise is WSDOT's Eastside Corridor deputy project director for project development (Figure 4). She is a key part of the core management team responsible for delivering this \$1.7 billion transportation program on time and on budget.

With 21 years of progressive engineering experience in transportation, Denise's responsibilities include all aspects of preparing a project for construction. She takes the project through the environmental processes and into the preliminary design, readying it for construction completion. Denise

also develops partnerships with agencies and communities along the 50-mile Eastside Corridor. Successful projects aren't developed in a vacuum, and she informs and builds relationships with stakeholders through the inevitable surprises that occur in every complicated project.

Denise is currently developing an express toll lanes strategy for the Eastside Corridor, including I-405 and SR 167. Nationally, toll lanes are gaining more and more attention as an innovative way to manage congestion. Denise delivered a planning level traffic and revenue study for 50+ miles of express toll lanes on the Eastside Corridor to the legislature. This work requires close coordination with transit agencies, local agencies, and elected officials throughout the corridor. Implementation of express toll lanes will change the future of transportation in the Puget Sound because it is a stepping-stone toward regional tolling on all major corridors.

Denise began her career with WSDOT in the late 1980s as a construction inspector on the I-90 reconstruction project. She quickly advanced within WSDOT, moving on to the region's traffic office and then to the design division. In 2003, Denise assumed her current role as I-405 deputy project director, just as the team received several hundred million dollars in new gas tax funds.

At Home

Denise comes from a construction family; her parents owned a small company specializing in site preparation. After graduating from the University of Washington as a civil engineer, she joined WSDOT for the unique opportunity to experience a wide range of civil engineering practices. Traveling with her family, though, is Denise's major passion outside of work. She has a special interest in Italy (Figure 5).

Stacy C. Trussler, P.E.

At Work

Stacy is WSDOT's Eastside Corridor deputy project director for construction (Figure 6). Stacy's responsibilities for the Eastside Corridor program include all aspects of managing a project from preliminary design through construction, including writing construction contracts, advertising and selecting a contractor, and working closely with the contractors to build the project. Stacy managed six projects under construction in just the past year. Stacy has been and continues to be instrumental in shaping design-build contracting policy for the Eastside Corridor and Washington State.

Stacy, who has been recognized by industry and local agencies as a transportation leader, is both a proficient speaker and presenter and a strong decision maker. Stacy has the ability to develop trust, an essential ingredient for suc-

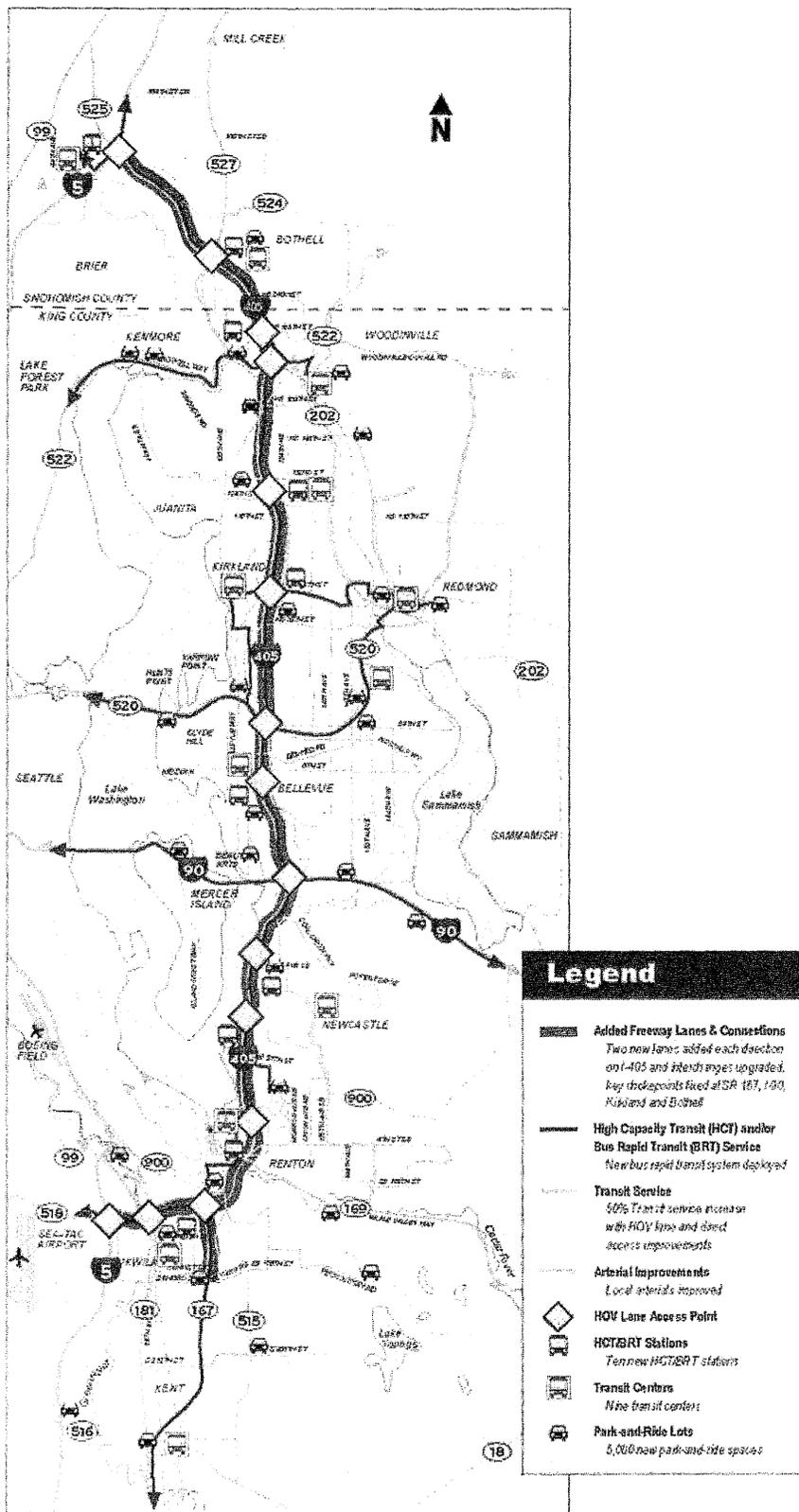


Figure 2. Map of I-405 corridor showing planned improvements (image courtesy of the Washington State Department of Transportation)

Eastside Corridor Funded Projects

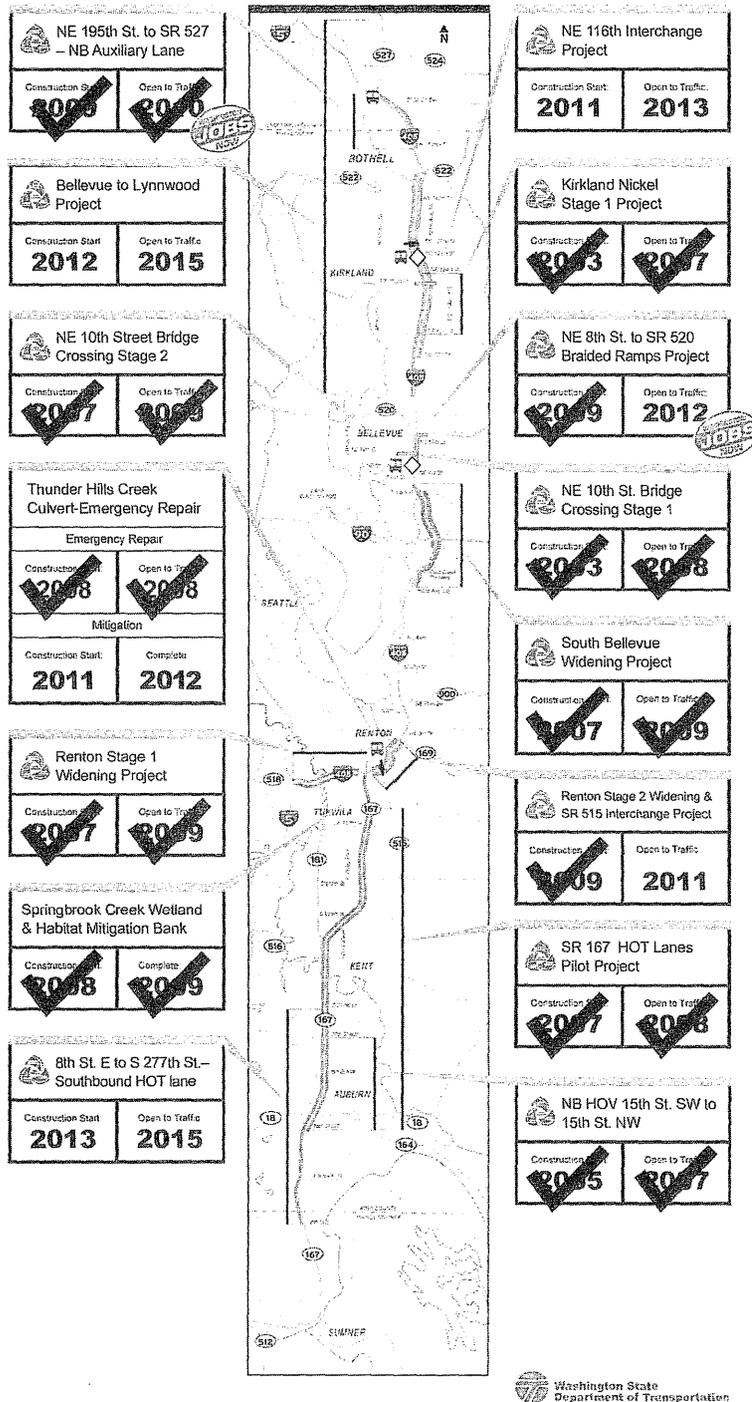


Figure 3. Eastside Corridor funded projects (image courtesy of the Washington State Department of Transportation)



Figure 4. Denise speaks with a member of the public at an express toll lane open house

cess, with the public and local agencies and contractors. She has turned struggling professional relationships into trusting, high-performing partnerships.

Stacy has 18 years of experience in the areas of construction contract procurement and administration, transportation design, and environmental analysis, treatment, and compliance. Before joining the Eastside Corridor project, she held progressive positions within WSDOT, and before that, she worked as an environmental engineer for the Environmental Protection Agency and in private consulting. Stacy received a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and a master's degree in environmental engineering from Washington State University. She was recently promoted to Urban Planning Office Director.

At Home

Stacy grew up in the Pacific Northwest with three sisters, and she now has eight nieces and nephews, one great-niece,



Figure 5. Denise and her husband Dave and daughters Elizabeth and Sophia vacationing in Italy



Figure 6. Stacy explains the I-405 South Bellevue Project to the governor of Washington and the media

and one newborn great-nephew (Figure 7). "I love being Auntie Stacy. The kids know they have an auntie that they can rely on," she says.

When she's not busy with the Eastside Corridor, she studies the Argentine Tango, adding that she has "incorporated the lead/follow dancing analogy into design-build contracting and general engineering consultant (GEC) management presentations, both to a room full of dirty boots and jeans and to a consultant firm training session on owner relationships. I call my presentation, 'So, You Think You Can Dance?!'"

She is inspired by "up-cycling" (a new take on recycling), which is transforming old jewelry into new wearable art creations and tailoring suits and dresses from second-hand stores into modern professional suits. "I have taken old frames and refurbished them into fabulous gallery-quality art for my home."

Wendy M. Taylor, P.E.

At Work

Wendy is an associate vice president with HNTB and is the Eastside Corridor GEC project manager (Figure 8). Her re-



Figure 7. Stacy with a close family friend

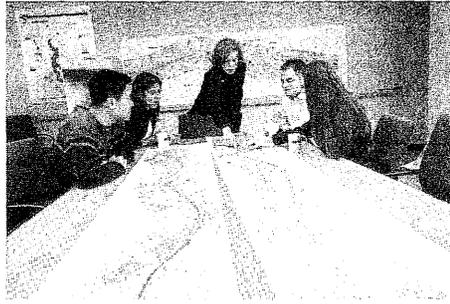


Figure 8. Wendy working with her team on design alternatives

sponsibilities as GEC manager include strategic planning and staffing to ensure WSDOT has the resources and expertise to support this multifaceted program, and her focus is on client satisfaction and delivery. As project manager for the GEC team, Wendy is responsible for managing the consulting team (up to 150 consultants from 10 separate firms) and integrating them with WSDOT to deliver the I-405 master plan. She draws from national and local experts to bring WSDOT the right team for continued project success.

Wendy is also part of the delivery team responsible for managing the first tolling project for the Eastside Corridor. She currently serves as design manager for the Eastside Corridor express toll lanes project, which brings unique design and policy challenges as this corridor and the region embrace tolling as a means to manage congestion and fund projects.

Wendy's broad background and 25 years of experience in transportation planning and design have given her the tools needed to manage this complex project. Wendy previously worked on a wide variety of projects for public agencies and private developers across the nation. Her experience includes transit planning, corridor transportation planning, highway and local arterial design, and rail design. While the majority of Wendy's career consists of mega transportation projects, she also worked for an architectural firm and was involved in site civil projects for major hospitals, schools, and sporting venues, including the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

At Home

Wendy has a passion for furthering the engineering profession. Each year she works with local high school students to engage them in current transportation policy issues. She helps the students practice technical problem-solving skills and understand the benefits of an engineering career. Wendy is active in the Women's Transportation Seminar and recently served as scholarship chairperson and a professional mentor. In addition to working with students, Wendy finds time to cook for and serve the homeless, train for sprint triathlons, create jewelry and glassblowing art, and hike with family and friends (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Wendy and her husband Ken hiking the Cascade Mountains in Washington State.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In a series of interviews at the Eastside Corridor project office in Bellevue, Wash., Cieri, Trussler, and Taylor took a break from their rigorous schedules to share their stories. They reflected on what went into shaping their successful careers and lives. The following excerpts reflect their valuable life lessons and experience.

How did you get to where you are now, and what were the most difficult challenges?

Denise: The broad experience I have gained within WSDOT has prepared me well for my current role on the Eastside Corridor program. However, I found over the years that I have had to push myself at times in my career to get out of my comfort zone. For example, promoting into the traffic office from construction was a little scary, but the experience paid off. Similarly, seeking out a design position was not the easiest course for me, but again, it paid off and really gave me the skills to get to where I am now. You need to work within your agency or firm to find new challenges and opportunities throughout your career; you can't wait for them to "just happen" to you.

Stacy: Many years ago, I was told that my three best work skills are decision making, communication, and strategic leadership. I needed confidence to let my natural skills shine through. In graduate school, I had to give quite a few presentations to senior management at the company that paid for my research scholarship. My professor worked very closely with me before the very first presentation. I was so nervous. After the presentation, I was praised by the company's senior management. This experience gave me the confidence to learn more about effective presentations and to create opportunities to practice my skills.

Wendy: I got to where I am through hard work and family support. Early in my career, some of the most difficult challenges involved being taken seriously as a woman engineer. I remember in one of my first client meetings, one of the men thought that I was at the meeting to take notes. I'm

assuming that was a natural conclusion for him, as I was the only woman in the room. There were similar situations early in my career that made me realize that women leaders in engineering were still a relatively new phenomenon. This is changing at a slower pace than perhaps many women engineers would like, but I have certainly noticed a difference as I have advanced in my career.

Did you feel you were a minority, being a woman in engineering? How did gender affect or shape your career?

Denise: Although it was quite obvious that men outnumbered women by quite a bit in school, I didn't really pay much attention at the time. Working at WSDOT over the years has been a similar experience for me. It is about who is the best person for the job, and gender has little, if anything, to do with my career. The only time I can say my gender was "noticed" was earlier in my career when I worked as a construction inspector. At times, it was obvious that the workers felt it necessary to change their demeanor and rough language around me. But I have not found this to be true in the last decade or so.

Stacy: I believe that "acting like a man" to be successful is a perception. In order to excel in traditional male fields, I have heard that many women have learned to be more "straight and narrow." I have been advised by many colleagues to be less feminine in my working style: to wear slacks and low heels, to keep my hands at my side, to be less facially expressive, to lower my energy, and to use only technical jargon. I have tried this approach, and it simply isn't me. Recently, I looked around at the successful leaders in my industry, especially the men. I watched them, their demeanor, and their speaking styles. What I observed is that the leaders that I admire the most are the expressive, dynamic dynamos. The best advice that I can give both women and men is to be who you are. That's when you are performing your best.

Wendy: Since my college peers were about 50% women, it wasn't until I started working that I realized that women engineers were really in the minority. In my first job, I was one of two women engineers working for a large national consulting company. There were no role models in management for either of us to look up to. This smaller percentage of women in management positions has continued throughout my career. I am not sure that I realized the void of women in the workplace until I started working on the I-405 project, where women in management were an equal number if not in the majority. The relatively small number of women in engineering has probably affected my career in several ways. It took longer to gain the confidence to speak my opinion, and I am sure that I have done things more conservatively than my male counterparts. As my career has

advanced, my early experiences have made me realize the need to work with young women engineers.

What are your beliefs when it comes to work-life balance? How do these influence your actions?

Denise: When I was a newly graduated engineer, I could not imagine retiring, as work was such a central part of my life. Now that I have a family and many other outside interests, I find that although I love my job, I need to balance my time and energy to enjoy all of life, not just the work part. I achieve this by knowing my employees' strengths and mastering the art of delegation. I understand the value of managing and leading a team of professionals; without them, I find reaching my goals would be far more difficult.

Stacy: I believe that *work-life balance* is a misguided term. I don't know what a better term could be, perhaps *work-life blending*? Only when I'm with my girlfriends do I truly feel that I am not thinking about work, but then my work still defines me: They all say, "I can't believe that you are an engineer and you are so creative." I see work and life as blended rather than competitive with each other. Who, after all, really wants work that competes with life? It makes sense that they would complement each other.

Wendy: Finding work-life balance in today's frenetically paced world is no simple task for anyone. Being a working parent requires sacrifice and flexibility from all involved, including employer, spouse, child, and individual. I personally chose to work part-time when my son was young to be able to help balance those demands. This sacrificed my career to some extent during this period. I feel fortunate that my firm and the civil engineering profession offered me the flexibility to work part-time. Working on a reduced schedule allowed me to keep up my technical skill set, which was critical to my career advancement when the timing was right for me. As my child grew and demands lessened at home, opportunities presented themselves at work, resulting in more responsibility and new challenges, which I have enjoyed.

What would you say the key to recruiting and retaining women in civil engineering is?

Denise: Letting young women know that civil engineering has something for everyone. With so many specialties to choose from just in transportation, such as traffic, design, and construction, you will find a long and challenging career. I think the biggest issue for women or men is learning exactly what civil engineering is and why it may be a career they would enjoy. I believe the more outreach we civil engineers can do with the local schools to show engineering is a great field that embraces diversity, the more we can grow the numbers who seek a career in the field.

Stacy: I once read that civil engineers have saved more lives than all the medical advances combined. The civil engineering profession is very broad—it's not just about water,

concrete, steel, and dirt. To solve difficult problems, we work with public policy, improve the environment, clean our water, support mobility and commerce, contain sprawl, and work with communities, agencies, and elected officials. What I really enjoy about civil engineering is the opportunity to integrate the built environment into the natural environment—the opportunity to create a sustainable infrastructure. Because there is no one typical career path for civil engineers, young women should talk to other engineers, both women and men working in both public and private sectors, to get a good understanding of our profession.

Wendy: Recruiting women into engineering is a conundrum. With few women in the field, young women do not see this as a viable career option, and those that do enter the field have very few role models to relate to. One of the keys to recruiting and retaining them is to have role models at all levels in the field so they can see a career path for themselves and have people like themselves that they can relate to.

Do you think diversity is one of the I-405 team's strengths? How so?

Denise: *Flexible and nimble* is a phrase we've often used here at the Eastside Corridor. To embody this, you must have the right minds not just to plan and deliver the project but also to think strategically about how to be ready for the inevitable twists and turns that occur. Without diversity, you wouldn't have a team all working to be ready for each surprise that comes your way; you would instead all be thinking similarly. Diversity means you have many wonderful minds that think differently, all coming at a problem from a different perspective, helping to find the best possible solution when it's needed. We have a team with diverse backgrounds that allow each person to bring something different to the table, thereby strengthening our ability to deliver projects and be ready for whatever comes our way.

Stacy: Diversity is often interpreted as a people issue, focused on the differences and similarities of people. On our team, however, we hold a different perspective on diversity: We focus on the work. We are project oriented, ahead of schedule, under budget. We acknowledge and celebrate our team's successes, both personally and professionally. Desks do not go undecorated on birthdays or the birth of a child, nor a key work milestone pass without a silly, fun awards ceremony. Everyone is a part of our team, and everyone delivers.

Wendy: I think that working creatively and thinking outside the box is our team's biggest strength. The Eastside Corridor's management has defined this, and the team has embraced it. Those who think more linearly have trouble working on this type of project, while those who look for creative solutions flourish. In addition, working as an integrated team made up of both WSDOT professionals and HNTB-led consultants has allowed the Eastside Corridor



Figure 10. Kim Henry poses with his core management team (Denise Cieri, Stacy Trussler, and Wendy Taylor)

teams to draw from a national pool of people with a diverse skill set able to solve the problem at hand.

* * *

I-405 Project Director Kim Henry provided a firsthand perspective on working day to day with women in strong leadership positions (Figure 10). Kim has worked for WSDOT for 29 years. As project director for the Eastside Corridor, Kim manages an integrated WSDOT/general engineering consultant team to deliver all project elements, including engineering, traffic, environment, communications, right-of-way, and construction. In the following paragraphs, he discusses the I-405 project and team.

What it is like to work with Cieri, Trussler, and Taylor?

I have worked with numerous talented teams over the years, and this is the second megaproject I have worked on in my career. Beyond a doubt, this is the best team I have worked with. All three, Denise, Stacy, and Wendy, have supportive team-building personalities and are thorough in following up on details, exceptional at planning for strategic decisions, and great at building relationships with communities and our contract partners.

Wendy, Stacy, and Denise have been a part of this project for 11, 10, and 7 years, respectively. This tenured relationship results in no surprises among the team and an uncanny ability to support each other. They are open to new delivery strategies and willing to investigate and apply national best practices and to pioneer new project delivery strategies for WSDOT. Because they have followed projects from cradle to grave, they can see what works well and what does not work so well and make the appropriate adjustments. Their innovative and flexible approach has resulted in a program of projects that are under budget and ahead of schedule, which builds public trust. Demonstrated delivery record and public trust are critical to discussions about how to continue with the next funding phases of the project.

Table 1. Representation of Women among Civil Engineers and Engineering Managers on the I-405 Project

Professional group	WSDOT and GEC combined	WSDOT only	National
Civil engineers	61	19	346,000
Civil engineers who are women	17 (28%)	8 (42%)	10%
Engineering managers	29	10	109,000
Engineering managers who are women	9 (31%)	5 (50%)	6%

Note. GEC = general engineering consultant; WSDOT = Washington State Department of Transportation. National data are from 2008 Census data.

This management team is quick to recognize individual and team accomplishments as well as opportunities for improvement. Denise, Stacy, and Wendy are always looking to expand the team's knowledge and develop individual careers. This results in positive morale as team members continue to grow professionally. As a result of this positive work environment, many of their key staff have as much seniority on the project as they do and are committed to delivering this program successfully.

I never think about this team being treated differently because they are all women or my needing to do anything different because of that. Sure, water cooler conversations are sometimes less about sports and more about fashion, but when it comes to engineering and delivering the project, we are all on the same page. This team has a single focus on how to provide the best public benefit for the project dollars.

INCREASING DIVERSITY IN THE ENGINEERING WORKFORCE

Achieving a diverse group of engineers doesn't happen by accident. WSDOT began working on building up the diversity of their engineers many, many years ago. The efforts were multipronged, such as attending college recruiting fairs and drawing in the available diversity. To assist in this effort, WSDOT would bring some of their diversity to the fairs, so that college students could relate to or be inspired by the engineers who staffed the booths.

WSDOT has high-level engineer managers throughout the agency; not only has the agency been able to promote diversity, but recruits have built highly successful careers. For example, the current Washington transportation secretary is a woman, and she is also an engineer who has worked her way through the ranks, creating an outstanding role model for women across the state. Clearly, WSDOT's numbers show that their efforts through the years have paid off (see Table 1). Diversity adds great value to their teams and their ability to deliver top projects.

CONCLUSION

The Eastside Corridor project team has succeeded in delivering a multibillion dollar program by working as a group in an environment that reflects diversity and inclusiveness at all levels. As in most things, there is rarely just one key to achieving success. The members of the project management team all agreed that the keys to their success in delivering this megaproject include the following:

- *Co-location:* The entire megaproject team is co-located with the general engineering consultant, enhancing daily communications and quick decision making. The team motto has always been "check your business card at the door" because it doesn't matter what agency or firm each individual works for; delivering the project is everyone's Number 1 goal.
- *Communication:* Each member of the management team is an excellent communicator, whether in giving a briefing to a room full of mayors or simply sitting in on the weekly multidiscipline project meetings. Communicating one's ideas well, especially technical ones, is critical to success.
- *Consistency:* The leadership team has stuck together for over 8 years, morphing their responsibilities as project delivery moved forward.
- *Collaboration:* The team atmosphere is focused on project delivery.
- *Celebration:* The management team always stops to take a moment to acknowledge the project's successes and milestones, as well as the people who helped make them happen.

Diana Giraldo is an engineer with HNTB Corporation and is ASCE's Seattle Section Diversity Committee Chair. She can be contacted via e-mail at dgiraldo@hntb.com.

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