

The CT Interview

Sherry Little

Ms. Sherry E. Little was sworn in as Deputy Administrator of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) on February 20, 2007. Little joins Administrator James S. Simpson in leading the 500-member agency that administers and oversees the \$9 billion federal assistance program to the nation's public transportation operators. She helps Administrator Simpson oversee the FTA's \$1.4 billion New Starts program, which ensures that American citizens get the greatest return on their investment in major capital transit projects.

Prior to joining the Bush Administration, Little served as Senior Professional Staff Member to Senator Richard Shelby on the United States Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs. As the (then) Chairman's primary advisor on public transportation, she authored the Senate's version of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) which authorized the nation's \$53 billion public transportation program that President Bush signed into law in August 2005.

Prior to EXPO 2008, Ms. Little found some time to share her insights with Community Transportation magazine.

CT: You arrived at the Federal Transit Administration with a considerable amount of experience in community and public transportation policy, having served on the Senate Banking Committee under then-Chairmen Phil Gramm (R-TX) and Senator Richard Shelby (AL). Tell us about this experience and how it informs the vital work you're doing at FTA.

Ms. Little: I must admit that I began my career at the FTA with a leg up! This is an industry that I understand

and for which I have a great affinity. Back in 1999, I joined the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs and was immediately assigned a portfolio of issues that included community development banking, mortgage reform and public transportation. Of particular importance was oversight of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Federal Transit Administration. That function consumed much of my time and was high on the agenda of both chairmen I served. The combination of these issues gave me the background to understand the nexus between community building and public transportation.

During my eight years with the committee, I oversaw the implementation of TEA-21 and then in 2003, developed the Senate's version of SAFETEA, which was signed into law in August of 2005. The timing was perfect as, upon my arrival, TEA-21 had just passed. I spent the early years of TEA-21 familiarizing myself with the industry's challenges and identifying areas where communities were successfully addressing mobility needs. I developed an understanding of FTA's oversight and grant-making authority and I actively sought to hear directly from the industry about how FTA's programs were functioning. It was during that industry outreach process that I developed a partnership and even a friendship with Dale Marsico and Chris Zeilinger. Because of their advocacy of practical, real-world solutions to mobility challenges throughout rural and small urban areas, I became a believer in the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) and its approach. I was pleased to carry the Association's message to the members of the Senate whom I served, and consequently, you'll find many of CTAA's good ideas

reflected in SAFETEA.

CT: Please give us your insight about the perspective of looking at, and working on, transit for both Congress and the Administration. How are they similar and different?

Ms. Little: There are so many elements of work at FTA that I was never cognizant of when I was on the Hill. It's no surprise that working on Capitol Hill is dynamic and fast-paced, but being a Deputy Administrator of FTA is much more challenging than I ever imagined. I found that a lot of decisions made by members of Congress — seemingly simple things — can have a long-lasting and powerful impact on the agency. I don't just mean formula funding allocations. Equally important are the priorities that Congress establishes — from mandating ADA compliance so that people with disabilities have access, to combating traffic congestion.

My time at FTA has been a whirlwind! FTA oversees major capital infrastructure projects across the country and deals with industry relations. I'm in charge of the day-to-day operations of a 500-plus person agency with a budget of \$10 billion. In addition to the multitude of rural and small-urban grantees we serve, we manage a portfolio of New Starts capital projects, which includes \$30 billion worth of transit projects now under construction. This is one of the largest discretionary programs in the government. It's a complicated yet rewarding experience, and I am bolstered everyday by the hard-working nature of the FTA career staff. I know that every time I make a public appearance, I represent FTA employees, and I do my best to live up to that responsibility. It's also an honor to serve under President Bush and Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters in this capacity. It's humbling to know that the decisions we make on a daily basis have an immense impact on our communities and our nation.

CT: During your tenure as FTA Deputy Administrator, which accomplishments are you most proud of? What aspect of your work do you believe will have the most lasting impact on community and public transportation?

Ms. Little: Last year, FTA won the Employer of the Year award from the Women's Transportation Seminar. We have the award prominently displayed in our offices. This award is particularly meaningful to us because we were nominated for the award by our employees, and the award reflects what we believe and practice on a day-to-day basis: our human capital resources are our most important asset.

I'm very proud of FTA's contribution to the Hurricane Katrina recovery in Mississippi, New Orleans, and Texas. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita affected so many people — including me. My brother was a New Orleans resident prior to the storm and suffered greatly. I was educated in Mississippi and remember the beautiful Gulf Coast before it was subjected to the ravages of the storm.

Around the time I came on board at FTA, the Bush Administration provided generous resources to rebuild transit systems harmed by the hurricanes. I made sure the money was allocated to the appropriate places, and that transit agencies received the resources that they needed to help fix up their systems and put streetcar lines and bus routes back in business. In August of last year, I was involved in another disaster relief effort, when the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis, Minn., collapsed. Along with other FTA and DOT staff, I spent almost a month in Minnesota facilitating recovery on behalf of the White House and Secretary Peters and ensuring that transit needs were being addressed in the meantime. It was a devastating time, but the efforts our department put forward and the lessons I took back to the office were priceless.

Finally, I believe our work to ramp up rural transit programs will have a long-lasting impact on community and public transportation. From TEA-21 to SAFETEA, we have seen unprecedented growth in rural programs, and we need to track that growth and ensure that the funds are being used effectively. FTA implemented a rural data collection program for the first time to show the extent of rural needs and how rural areas are spending their funds on transportation services. As a result, we had to increase the technical ca-

capacity of the operators and grantees providing additional assistance to the state DOTs so they fully understand all the FTA requirements.

CT: Given all of your experience in our field, please tell our readers what you think the most critical issues are facing community and public transportation today? How can transit managers and leaders best be ready to respond to these issues?

Ms. Little: Providing safe, affordable and reliable transportation for everyone is always a critically important issue for us and one that must be reflected in our funding priorities.

Two major related challenges we face are identifying new and sustainable sources of funding for capital transit projects and ensuring that our legacy systems are maintained in a state of good repair.

State and local governments are increasingly hard pressed to finance their share of capital transit funds year after year, in the face of budget deficits and sharply rising construction costs. And though voters have approved about 70 percent of initiatives for tax increases to help fund local transit projects, there is still an opportunity to advance additional sound revenue sources — such as implementing congestion-pricing charges in busy urban corridors — that could raise billions for a variety of long-term transportation needs. We are strongly encouraging states and localities to implement dedicated local funding sources to help pay for much needed transit.

Transit's share of total federal funding for surface transportation projects has remained flat for more than 10 years. For half a century, we've relied on the Highway Trust Fund to generate cash for highway construction and other needs. We all contribute to this fund, professionally and personally, in the form of taxes on gasoline, but the fund is no longer



the cash cow it used to be — and in fact is expected to run more than a \$3 billion deficit in 2009. The fund's short-term future is unclear and its long-term future is in serious jeopardy. At a time where we need to grow our systems, we have fewer resources to do so.

Gas tax revenues will decline in the coming decades as people drive more fuel-efficient cars and as driving growth levels off; so we need to find new funding solutions.

Many people wonder if we should just raise the fuel tax. A bipartisan commission on the future of our national surface transportation recently proposed a 40-cent per gallon federal gasoline tax over the next five years, with automatic increases tied to inflation. This would more than triple federal fuel taxes from current levels by 2018.

Before increasing the tax burden, we must be good stewards of the funds taxpayers already entrust to us. And, it's not clear a fuel tax hike would fix the problem, especially as we are working to be more fuel efficient and thus, creating a reverse incentive.

To respond to these issues, transit managers and leaders must be cognizant of the serious impact they have on their communities and how they affect the quality of people's lives.

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People need transit to get to work, pick up their kids from school, and to enjoy and contribute to their community. When coming up with solutions to these problems, we can't lose sight of the individual or our fundamental purpose, which is ensuring that Americans have mobility.

CT: The process of reauthorizing all federal transportation programs is under way. Has the current FTA administration developed any principles for this process that can be shared? How significant do you believe this reauthorization to be in terms of the future of transit in America?

Ms. Little: The upcoming reautho-

rization effort could not be more important in terms of the future of transit in America. We are at a crossroads in transportation. Our funding system is about to go bankrupt, climate change is a growing concern, and highway congestion is disrupting the daily lives of Americans across the nation. It's time to get back to the drawing board and think long and hard about what role transit can play in solving these problems.

The old way of doing business doesn't work. Reauthorization offers a fresh opportunity to create a new paradigm where there is more reliance on the private sector to build transportation infrastructure and operate our transit systems. This is also a chance to offer more flexible funding options which would allow more discretion at the

state and local level. Bottom line: Washington D.C. does not have all the answers!

In addition to efforts that are going on at the departmental level, FTA is taking a top-down look at our programs as reauthorization approaches. Our interests lie in streamlining our programs, eliminating unnecessary requirements to make funding more accessible to grantees, and enhancing oversight, among other things.

CT: Your experience suggests an affinity for, and understanding of, the needs of rural and small-urban transit operators and the communities and passengers they serve. How has this understanding developed and please offer your predictions for the future of these operations.

Ms Little: Being a country girl from the South, I do understand the needs of rural and small-urban transit operators and their respective communities. I really respect the work CTAA has done to serve the needs of the transit industry, especially the rural and small-urban communities. Transit is not just about building infrastructure, but it's about the people that infrastructure serves.

The importance of transit to rural areas or low-income individuals has been demonstrated to me time and time again. In my spare time, I serve as the Vice Chairman of a non-profit agency called Covenant House, which provides direct assistance and intervention services to abused, neglected, homeless and at-risk youth including street outreach, academic remediation, vocational training, advocacy and legal services. One issue I ran across repeatedly was how to get the kids in the program to the training centers when the centers weren't located near public transit. The nexus between poverty and transportation really became apparent. Clearly, access equals opportunity.

My position with FTA allows me to develop policies that would help individuals like those served by Covenant House. I love my job and here is why: it's not just about building

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infrastructure for our country, it's about impacting communities, big or small, rural or urban, rich or poor.

CT: Coordination has been an issue the current FTA administration has embraced. In your opinion, how will such important issues as health care, senior citizen's quality of life, and veteran's services impact the future of community and public transportation?

Ms. Little: These important issues will continue to have a profound impact on our transportation network. Having effective mobility systems in place to serve these populations will not only improve the quality of individual lives, but will save dollars. Preventive outpatient health care is a much cheaper option than acute care in-hospital stays. Our returning veterans, some of whom carry injuries, will need a way to get to health care facilities, jobs, and other support services.

Addressing these mobility challenges is the goal of the Administration's United We Ride initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to harness the transportation spending of indi-

vidual agencies into a coordinated set of services that expands mobility options for individuals while reducing the per passenger trip costs. In other words, we want to get more rides for the same or less resources. And we want our customers to have an easier time getting their rides. Our goal is to create a single source of transportation information rather than make individuals negotiate a maze of different federal programs.

I am proud of my role on the Federal Interagency Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) on behalf of Secretary Peters; and am encouraged to see how agencies across the country are coming together to promote interagency cooperation so that transportation-disadvantaged persons have access to more transportation services.

Mobility management is another top priority of the Administration, and it will play a big role in this process. We are funding mobility managers that are coordinating transportation providers; funding sources and services to meet the real needs of individuals. We have seen many successes with our coordination efforts, but I know there is much more to do to make

our transit systems better and more responsive to the people who need the services most.

CT: What does the future hold for you after this administration? Will you continue to work in the community and public transit policy field?

Ms. Little: Frankly, I have been so caught up and involved in working with Administrator Simpson run the agency, I haven't given a lot of thought to the idea of what I might do when I leave. However, I can tell you that this job has given me more insight than I ever expected.

For instance, I recently went on a trip to Africa with Deputy Secretary Admiral Barrett to promote transportation as a means for economic development and poverty alleviation. In order to have a healthy economy, people need to be able to get their goods to market and employees need to be able to get to work. I also had the chance to learn about the culture and lifestyle of South Africa.

Growing up in south, I saw a lot of wild animals running around. But it was nothing compared to the animal population in Africa. During part of my trip, I stayed in a lovely, rural, South African hotel. I had no idea that the local baboon population enjoyed the hotel as much as I did until one of the baboons unzipped the window screen and climbed into my room.

Fortunately, I was away from my room attending meetings when the baboon helped himself to one of the mangos I had just bought. To say the least, I was a bit surprised when I returned and saw everything in disarray and covered with mango peel.

So, you see, my FTA experiences have prepared me for quite a bit more than I bargained for, as I look forward to moving on to new adventures in life and in continuing my career.

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