



To live and drive in LA

The Los Angeles Department of Transportation's Seleta Reynolds aims to bring 21st-century mobility to a city built for cars

The entire way we travel from point A to point B is changing. This transformation is creating a new ecosystem of personal mobility with implications affecting more than just the automotive industry. Our Future of Mobility practice serves the entire ecosystem of companies working in and around mobility to actively shape its emergence.

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Mobility in the City of Angels

With 3.8 million residents and 7,500 miles of streets crisscrossing nearly 500 square miles, the City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation manages one of the nation's largest and most complex transportation networks.¹ We sat down with DoT general manager Seleta Reynolds to hear her thoughts on introducing new mobility services in this complicated environment, how an integrated digital platform could benefit the city, and the true purpose of transit.

DEREK PANKRATZ: Maybe we could start with a bit about you and your background and how you came to be involved in transportation. It was a somewhat unconventional path.

SELETA REYNOLDS: Yes, it was. I grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, a rural state. I went to college on the East Coast and didn't have a lot of specifics about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I loved to write; I loved history; I loved acting. I was really into the arts, got my degree in American history. I felt a lot of urgency to find somewhere where I could earn a living, and got a job as the bicycle parking intern for the city of Oakland's public works agency. I worked with the city's architect and engineer, mapping out all the storm drains. I worked for the public information officer and learned how to support public officials and plan events.

And all along, I was also working in the fledgling field of bicycle and pedestrian planning and design, as the city was undertaking its very first bicycle and pedestrian master plan. The community of professionals that was doing that work was really small,

and they were outsiders—they weren't part of the mainstream traffic-engineering, transportation-planning community. I fell in love with this idea of pushing back on the status quo, of transformation and change in the way that professionals thought about transportation.

So I felt like I found my family—and the area where I might be able to make a difference: While the engineers were incredibly talented analysts, they weren't always focused on solving the same problems that I was focused on solving. They would be solving for capacity or for speed or for congestion. And they struggled sometimes to communicate their findings and their work to the public and to policymakers. I felt like those were areas where I could add some value, but I also knew that I needed to learn about the broader field of transportation planning, because when you're doing bike planning in a built-out city, it's not really about the bike—it's about understanding how to fit something into a system that's already fully utilized. So you have to learn how to do a parking study if you're going to propose parking removal. You have to understand level of

service if you're going to propose lane removals. You have to understand freight and logistics if you're going to move loading zones. And you have to understand community outreach and how to make a neighborhood's worries *your* worries, so that you can credibly come in and say, "I'm going to change something."

I was very lucky to get hired by a consulting firm that gave me the opportunity to learn a bunch of those things—especially how to treat people with integrity and respect even in tough conversations, and how to be confident in your own decision-making when the future is uncertain and when it's impossible to know in the moment whether you are making the right decision. But I eventually went back to the public sector because I missed being close to where decisions were getting made.

DP: And that ultimately brought you to the City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation. How has the transportation landscape changed in LA recently?

SR: In cities, the only constant is change, right? In the '30s, '40s, and '50s, people, particularly in Los Angeles, thought that to build the city of the future—and Los Angeles has always been a place of big audacious goals, dreamers, thinkers—you had to take an infrastructure-heavy approach to build the city around the automobile. So we became this city of villages.

At some point that seemed to hit the wall, and many people became incredibly disillusioned with the



SELETA REYNOLDS

way our city has been built. And so over the last 15 or 20 years, Los Angeles has been engaged in trying to rebuild the old network of rail that used to connect the city, because there's an acknowledgment that if the city is going to continue to grow, we have to move more people more efficiently through corridors. I don't buy into the argument that transit exists to solve congestion. I believe transit exists to enable a thriving city to keep thriving and to keep growing.

SCOTT CORWIN: But rebuilding rail lines is really expensive and takes a long time, right?

SR: It is, and it does. But it has to be part of the answer. The way that we deliver infrastructure in cities is on these cycles that take years, and it's expressed in concrete and asphalt and metal and steel. That has to keep happening. And the way that happens is that we go out and we do a study and we contemplate it. And then we analyze it. And then we do public outreach. And then we do environmental review, and then we design it, and then we put it out to bid, and then we pay somebody a lot of money to build it. And then, at some point, we operate it.

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Meanwhile, as the cost comes down of riding around in a vehicle-for-hire that eventually maybe becomes connected and autonomous, we're seeing people flee the public transit system to use these other, less efficient forms of transportation.

SC: But don't you take that as no different than when people started to buy cars? They were voting, and they're essentially saying the public transit system is not sufficient for their needs.

SR: That's right, because it isn't sufficient for their needs, plainly.

SC: So there's this really interesting dynamic where all this innovation is catalyzing a transformation and injecting all this funding from the private sector. On the other hand, it's a bit of a free-for-all, with

each service provider optimizing its own mode and its own business. And you have to think about optimizing the city.

SR: Right. And how do I avoid the real mistake of the past, which is that the public and private and nonprofit and academic sectors stayed in silos and mostly acted in their own self-interest? That's how we ended up with what we have now, which is sort of a tragedy of the commons. That's the thing I am most interested in solving for. And there isn't a playbook, because we haven't ever done it.

SC: So how do you deal with people voting with their feet? The disruption you were talking about inevitably has winners and losers. They're very real. How do you play the orchestra conductor and get the symphony to play together with all these different pieces?

SR: Again, for me, it starts with neighborhoods and making their worries my worries. It has to start there in order to get people to come together to have tough conversations about the future and what we're going to choose to do and not to do.

SC: Is it your job to defend the status quo of the public transit system?

SR: My job has to be to focus on the people of Los Angeles. Their economic mobility is directly connected to whether they can afford to own a car. And if that status quo continues, then the city could literally grind to a halt. So I have to figure out what suite of things is needed to fix that outcome. That includes transit—but has to also include other, very strange bedfellows.

SC: There are all these potential blocks in that puzzle. How do you accommodate the fact that it's a cacophony of voices and interests as well? Can you

use something like dynamic pricing as a means to begin to re-equilibrate supply and demand?

SR: I think the underlying truth, which cuts across that cacophony of voices, is that we have to manage demand for private automobile ownership and single-occupant driving on a public utility—roads—that we have provided for decades basically free of charge. There’s no other public utility we deliver in that manner. And as a result, that public utility is failing to meet these higher-level outcomes that we should be concerned with, whether that’s making sure that the city is affordable to everyone, making sure that people can really access opportunities here, making sure that people can take care of their loved ones and get access to services and education. That requires a whole bunch of choices that we have to introduce into the system. But it also includes managing demand. And you’ll see at different levels of government that people are starting to understand and appreciate that.

SC: I want to test this. What you’re saying is that we’ve had a system that has been so configured around the privately owned passenger automobile, with all of this indirect and direct subsidization, that it’s created these negative externalities. So now we’re going to start pricing for the use of the infrastructure, we’re going to start pricing for the carbon impact, and we’re going to start pricing for its impact on our efficient movement?

SR: Right. We are going to have to have a whole-sale rethinking of how we price everything. If I give you a bus pass for free or access to a carshare, that helps with some amount of behavior change. But if I charge you—*really* charge you—for parking, or if I provide less parking, we can get real change. Thinking about the future, that discussion starts at

the curb, but it also may start in the sky when we’re thinking about goods delivery going airborne—or maybe urban passenger travel going airborne 10 years from now. If we start by pricing that now, then it’s always there.

SC: That raises an important issue around this whole idea of a digital mobility platform and pricing. One of the resistance points is potentially the perception that it’s another tax. How can you introduce these kinds of things in a way where there’s really truly a win-win? We can say, “We’re going to increase throughput.” But how do you deal with the intangibility in the minds of the citizenry?

SR: When you look at the case studies of where it’s been successful, every single time, it has required a political champion who is willing to spend his or her personal political currency on this issue. And the second part of it is: You can’t lead with pricing,

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and government can’t be the messenger on pricing. So figuring out who are the third-party voices is key. Lyft and Uber are out there talking about pricing—are they the right voices? Is it an academic institution? Is it a coalition of citizens? And do you have somebody who has the power to go reach out

beyond those folks into the other constituencies that need to at least understand?

It is not a mystery to us anymore how to do fast, cheap, high-quality, reliable, frequent transit service. You could designate lanes for bus rapid transit in and around a particular area that came frequently so you didn't have to memorize a schedule—and do that before you built a subway line. And at the same time, you roll out something like pricing. But it's about convincing people to give up a lane of traffic for a bus.

SC: More broadly, we've touched on the idea of an integrated mobility platform that can serve as a digital backbone for a city's transportation. In your mind, what should that look like?

SR: When you're talking about a mobility operating system, I believe strongly that we need a Linux version. It must be open. It must be done *by* cities and *for* cities in order for it to be broadly adopted and used. It can't be something that is curated, that is expensive, or that requires a lot of ongoing investment on behalf of cities. But I think that kind of platform is the other piece that has to exist to bring credibility to what we're talking about. Because people have to believe that the city is capable of bringing order to chaos. And the only way we're going to do that is through APIs, not RFPs. That's where we have to go to provide digital infrastructure on a cycle that takes milliseconds, not years. While we have to keep building and maintaining that concrete infrastructure, we have to get really good, really fast at that digital infrastructure. Dockless scooters are just the latest example—there are 20, 30, 40, 50 business models coming after them. And we can't keep ad-hoc solving for them as though they are

stand-alone regulatory challenges. It's not going to be helpful for us if we focus on these sorts of shiny objects.

SC: Regulation should go hand-in-hand with the broader system perspective.

SR: The real disruption—and the thing we have to solve for—is that we need an entirely new chapter of municipal code that lets us behave more like an app store where we say, "Here's this new business model. It is an app-enabled mobility service, and they want to sell this thing in our app store on our hardware, which is our concrete and our asphalt." How are we going to insist upon the workflows that we need

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and the APIs that we need and the terms of service that we need, which include things like serving low-income communities and people that don't have smartphones? How do we make sure these things are done in a safe way? We

want to express our policy on technology in a way that allows us to quickly and easily say if we need to, "Operator A, you're operating electric jetpacks or something, and we're pulling you from the app store. You can't operate here anymore." The policy-makers and elected officials should be able to focus on the policy so the operating agencies can focus on the technology—and how to express the policy through that technology so that we can be constantly building that digital infrastructure.

SC: Overall, then, is it time for a complete rethink to a 21st-century version of transportation governance? And does that ultimately lead to the idea of a chief mobility officer who has much greater authority and span, not only within a city proper but within a region?

SR: When I talk about a new chapter of the municipal code, that's shorthand for how we can disrupt government regulation. We're relying upon tech companies to self-police. But the choices they make and the way they behave are influenced by a whole lot of factors. And that's understandable: They are private companies. They are not trying to protect the public good as their first, highest motivator. They're in a race. And competition makes people do weird things. So government has to figure out how to disrupt regulations, and part of that means that we probably cannot have federal rules that govern the behavior of things like autonomous vehicles

everywhere. There should probably be some kind of federal certification for the vehicles themselves, maybe for the technology. But when we write rules that have to work at a national level, they fall apart in cities. How do we disrupt regulation that is peculiar to the challenges of cities that actually helps? If I'm working on Los Angeles or San Francisco or Seattle or Portland or Chicago, then I actually have the systems and the knowledge of my city that make me a better manager of those public rights of way. So I think the answer is yes, we need to have 21st-century regulatory structures, and not just in transportation.

Endnote

1. Los Angeles Department of Transportation, "LADOT annual report fiscal year 2016–2017," accessed September 18, 2018.

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