

Private Calling Meets Public Service

A practicing professional brings an engineer's perspective to transit authority's Board of Directors

“It was something I have always wanted to do,” said Traffic Planning and Design President Kevin Johnson, P.E. “I feel that people in the community don’t get involved enough. We seem to shy away from public service.”

Johnson is discussing his recent appointment to the Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) Board of Directors, the largely invisible but politically powerful governing body of the nation’s fifth largest transit system. The community he refers to is his fellow professional engineers, a group that is under-represented on public authority boards. SEPTA board members,

This is not necessarily bad, but it is ironic and most unfortunate that engineering expertise is not more routinely applied to the governance of much of the country’s most critical infrastructure. As Johnson pointed out, “I’m bringing a different perspective. Public-sector boards are traditionally made up heavily of business people, but engineers are rare. The more diverse a board is, the better that board will be. I have the business background so I know what it means to manage and grow a business that is dependent on customers. I can also apply my engineering perspective to the traffic and land-use issues that SEPTA constantly confronts.”



like other boards at this level, are political appointees and tend to draw from the same pool as politics, which means lots of lawyers—there are at least eight on SEPTA’s 15-member board—and a sprinkling of business people and elected officials.

In fact, Johnson’s experience appears to suit him perfectly for his work on the board. He launched Pottstown, Pa.-based Traffic Planning and Design, Inc. in 1989 with just six employees and has built it up into a 135-person firm with four offices. Traffic Planning

and Design has an excellent national reputation, having won multiple awards competing against much larger firms.

Traffic Planning and Design's work is 75 percent private and 25 percent public, so Johnson knows how to work with government agencies to get projects approved and knows what it is like to work with government agencies to get projects accomplished. In fact, Traffic Planning and Design has worked twice as a SEPTA consultant. Both perspectives are valuable to SEPTA as it seeks to expand services and improve existing facilities. Johnson's help will be invaluable as SEPTA negotiates with county and city commissioners and improves relations with contractors.

Johnson explained, "I know the relationship from the consultant's perspective and I believe it can be a partnership, not adversarial. If we have better relationships with the engineering community, we'll have more and better firms pursuing projects and we're bound to get better results." Johnson concedes that SEPTA can be perceived as being demanding in terms of working relationships, but he is certain that will change. To that end, he has interviewed over a dozen active SEPTA consultants, and as a board member, he vows to improve the relations between SEPTA and the contractors it needs to get projects accomplished.

While building his business, Johnson kept his eye on the SEPTA board and positioned himself for that post by establishing a record of public service. He started with Board of Directors positions at the YMCA and his local chamber of commerce. He was then appointed by the Chester County Commissioners to the Chester County Planning Commission, which later appointed him for the SEPTA role. "I highly recommend getting involved the sooner the better," he emphasized. "It's like anything else. You start at entry level, and if you like it and are good at it, you move up."

As head of a business that is consistently selected as one of Pennsylvania's top 10 places to work, Johnson is also good at soliciting and applying feedback. In other words, he's a good listener—and that's a valuable skill for a member of any board. He believes that everyone needs to be part of the team. In addition to interviewing SEPTA consultants, he also reaches out to employees at every level of the transportation system.

For example, "One of the best responses I ever received was from a conductor who said that we needed extra conductors on SEPTA's

new late trains. It seems that late-night riders have often been drinking and it is hard for one conductor to manage them. It's something I would never have thought of, but it will make a big difference and show that we're listening. We need feedback from everybody."



▲ Kevin Johnson is a firm believer that the rewards outweigh the difficulties of largely unrecognized public service

FIRM MOVES UP TO 16TH BEST CIVIL ENGINEERING FIRM IN THE NATION

The 2008 judges for the annual *CE News* magazine Best Civil Engineering Firms To Work For competition ranked Traffic Planning and Design as the No. 16 firm—up one spot from No. 17 in 2007—on its prestigious list of the Top 50 Best Firms To Work For in the United States. This is the fifth consecutive year Traffic Planning and Design has ranked among the Top 25 firms nationwide.

Operating in five locations, Traffic Planning and Design prides itself on working seamlessly as one company with multiple locations as a way to leverage the considerable expertise of its professional staff and to achieve project success. Traffic Planning and Design's strategically located network of offices, progressive management structure, aggressive investment in technology, and priority on individual accountability enable the firm to provide high-quality service, responsiveness, and local knowledge for the benefit of clients, teaming partners, and ultimately the traveling public.

In addition, Traffic Planning and Design's philosophy effectively addresses the two leading causes for employee turnover, namely proximity to family and commuter travel time. As such, Traffic Planning and Design's employee retention rate is among the best in the nation, averaging better than 99 percent over the past two years. The direct benefits to Traffic Planning and Design's clients, teaming partners, and vendors include a cumulative knowledge base that grows long-term relationships with Traffic Planning and Design's project managers and stability in every aspect of the organization, from engineering and business operations staff through to the management and ownership structure.

Some of the response to his willingness to listen, however, was unexpected: "The only thing that surprised me was the amount of constituent services. People will call me about expediting things like a railroad crossing or to resolve an encroachment. I like these calls, and as an engineer it's always fun to solve problems. But it was a surprise."

SEPTA in a time of change

Johnson says that a perfect storm of positive factors makes this a good time to be a SEPTA board member. Pennsylvania's Act 44 was passed in 2007 and combines a number of statewide sources into a steady funding pool that greatly eases SEPTA's annual scramble to cover its operating budget. Increased fuel costs have driven new commuters into the system. And political attitudes seem to be changing as well, noticeably easing tensions between Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, and between SEPTA and consultants and employees. Green initiatives are catching hold, and the authority will be adding hybrid buses to its fleet by 2011.

It is a climate that Johnson finds invigorating. “SEPTA is in a unique position because we now have a dedicated funding source and can move beyond just keeping the trains running. As an institution, we’re accepting that we can get better at customer service and we’re starting to do simple things that make a big difference to our base.



We’re doing a good job now of improving our stations by adding parking and making them ADA-compliant. And we’re seeing more people, in and out of government, who understand the relationship between transportation and land use. That means we’re seeing more opportunities for joint development, and more development with densities that support public transit. It’s an exciting time.”

Public-service board work is the nuts and bolts of governance.

Board members don’t have the same public recognition as elected officials, but the decisions they make affect just as many lives and the assets they manage can be staggering. SEPTA’s 2009 operating budget, for example, is \$1.095 billion. SEPTA employs 9,000 people and manages 450 miles of track, 280 active stations, and 2,295 revenue vehicles. Average weekday ridership across the whole system is about 1 million passengers. Numbers like these suggest that the decisions of Johnson and his fellow board members will have significant, long-lasting impacts on the region. Short-term consequences of their actions are also significant—a weeklong strike in 2005 stranded nearly 400,000 riders and 27,000 public-school students.

Sustainability is a good example of SEPTA’s potential to affect southeast Pennsylvania. Rising fuel costs are a two-edged sword

for public transit. On one hand, operating expenses go up dramatically, but on the other hand, ridership also increases enough to stave off fare increases. As Johnson points out, rail lines are always more efficient than car travel—a full train is 15 times as efficient—so increasing the number of users is a great way to meet the area’s

sustainability goals. But increasing ridership comes with challenges: “It’s a nice problem to have, because of increased revenues, but it is a problem. We can’t get new railcars fast enough because of the quick spike, and extending service is difficult because it’s hard to lease new lines. We’ll just have to move as fast as we can.”

The authority is looking into leasing railcars from other authorities as a stopgap, but there are other capacity issues as well. Stations need more parking and other improvements, and the fare-collection system needs revamping. “SEPTA still operates in an ‘80s fare collection world, with no prepaid fare and no smart transit. You can buy passes, but you can’t buy credit at a machine and turnstiles don’t read the passes.” With an engineer’s characteristic pragmatism, Johnson adds, “It’s a

negative, of course, that we don’t already have a better system, but on the other hand it’s a positive that we can leapfrog intermediate technology and put in a truly state-of-the-art system with the RFP that is new on the street.”

The ridership issues are a good example of the joys and challenges of public service. It’s a joy, of course, to see system participation go up and to have a measurable, positive effect on the state’s

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economy and infrastructure—it’s one of the reasons busy, highly responsible people get into volunteer board work. But when even a positive trend is attended by difficulties, it’s easy to feel frustrated. Commuters in southeast Pennsylvania are fortunate that men like Johnson continue to feel that the rewards outweigh the difficulties of their largely unrecognized public service. **S**