

LA County Public Works Mark Pestrella: A Mission of Hope and Story



Mark Pestrella (WTS-LA Director at Large and Director of Los Angeles County Department of Public Works), Photos © John Livzey, 2017

Mark Pestrella believes everyone has their own unique story. His begins largely at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works. But it certainly doesn't stop there.

Its budget is larger than the GDP of more than three dozen countries. And any one of its six major business areas handles more emergencies and responsibilities in one year than many entire small towns. LA County Public Works is astounding. Delivering regional infrastructure and services for more than ten million residents in Los Angeles County, the agency has an annual budget of \$2.7 billion and a workforce of more than 4,500 professionals in a 4,000-square mile area. It is the largest public works agency in the US. And someone has to lead it. Enter Mr. Pestrella. But given the organization's size and scope, leading LA County Public Works must mean he's some sort of superhero. He never sees himself as that. In fact, he shuns the caped crusader ideology entirely; his philosophy is quite different. Instead, he underscores that being a public servant is much more about listening than lecturing.

"Whenever I meet with anyone, I take a few minutes to put down electronics and every other distraction, so that I can approach them with an open mind," the 30-year public service veteran explains. "That's been one of my practices for years. And I always try to meet with the people I'm working with and who are working for me. Even when I reached our functional-management level (where you have 200-300 employees under you), I made a commitment early on to meet with each individual for at least 15-20 minutes (but it always went longer). And before each meeting I would try to clean the slate and not have any stereotypes in my head about who that person was. In those meetings, I would typically ask them to tell me their story, or whatever they were comfortable with. You see, *everyone* has a story.

"And I have to tell you that I learned more leadership lessons in those meetings just listening than in any seminar or training. Those meetings also affected the people I was working with. Just asking them about *their* story made a real difference. People even cried in my office and told me they'd never been asked to share their personal stories before. Those meetings are about respecting people, where they come from and who they are, and encouraging them to participate and collaborate. Now, other Public Works managers do that, too. It's not required. They just discovered that it makes a very real positive difference."

Even today, as director, Mr. Pestrella still visits a division each week and does as much “cubicle-to-cubicle visiting” as possible to ask people their stories. But in addition to his inherent compassion, curiosity, and the exercise’s value, he also does this for another reason. He *sat* in those cubicles. He knows what that feels like. In his tenure, he has held numerous positions within the organization. And the value he brings to Public Works on a personal and inspirational level is matched by his technical skill and knowledge, as well as his institutional capital.



“We have 6 core service areas covering the county. And those areas drive what we do. We are a water-resource agency, so we oversee flood risk management, and we’re the sixth largest water retailer in Los Angeles County. We’re a transportation agency with multiple assets including 4,000 linear miles of road, five general aviation airports, and the vast majority of LA County bike lanes. We’re also a waste/landfill management agency. So, we oversee trash hauling, and the planning of waste disposal and five major landfills. We also review all of the development in the unincorporated areas within the county. That alone is 140 small communities and about one million people. We also provide building and safety services to seventeen cities. And we’re an emergency management agency.

“We handle 53,000 calls a year, responding to every type of emergency, from a traffic signal outage to a major incident like an earthquake or a fire. Then we’re the builder for the county, and we project manage all of the large capital projects for the county. So, you can see that we keep pretty busy. But given who we are and where we are and what we do, I like to say that, ‘We’re the emergency room of civil engineering in the United States. Anything that can go wrong will go wrong and anything that’s being built in terms of civil engineering we have our hand in it. And we have to handle it all.’ We’re like America’s societal and infrastructure test kitchen.”

Organized like a corporation, six public works deputy directors report to Mr. Pestrella. And he reports to the LA County Board of Supervisors. Mr. Pestrella credits the Board—which happens to be majority female for the first time in its history—for its stalwart, progressive, and proactive support. He also attributes great foresight and credit to the residents of LA County.

“Measures R and M [voter-approved, multi-decade, sales-tax provisions providing billions in dedicated transportation funding] are a great opportunity for Los Angeles County. The Board really saw it as a unique opportunity, as well. We have a great system of road maintenance in the county that we can now expand, and those measures will help with transit and a wide range of other transportation initiatives. But we have to thank the citizens of LA County for self-taxing and giving us secure, long-term funding for transportation.”

Mr. Pestrella knows well the considerable benefits of long-term, secure funding for the planning and implementation of infrastructure. And again, he is grateful to the citizens of Los Angeles County. But his mandate does not stop at transportation. And there is another overriding value that he believes in staunchly that actively informs his leadership.

“I learned early on that you really can’t provide true public service without being able to walk in the shoes of the people you serve. My experience is all about being out in every part of LA County. And most of the positions I’ve held have involved direct, meaningful contact with the people I serve—the communities. The county is so diverse, from Malibu to the Antelope Valley to the Kern County Line to South Central and East Los Angeles. You gain great perspective when you go out and see who’s getting what. How are we spreading out equity? Trying to create formulas that ensure equity is one of the greatest challenges we face. We always seek to create scenarios where the small guy’s voice is heard, where disadvantaged communities are heard. We do most of our work and outreach in twelve different languages here. And it’s

always amazing to learn what the community wants because it's often different than what I thought it would be.

"We're also always examining the make-up of our organization to ensure that we recruit from all sectors of the community. I've been blessed to have a Board that supports and demands that those kinds of values be incorporated into the structures we've built. Of course, when you have a truly diverse group of people working for you, you get better, more diverse and innovative solutions that better serve community needs through a higher level of awareness and understanding. Without question, the greatest business investment is an investment in diversity."

Naturally, Mr. Pestrella sees great alignment between his Public Works philosophy and WTS-LA.

"We've been involved with WTS-LA for about four years now. I got involved when I was appointed interim director and attended the annual scholarship and awards dinner. I was so impressed with the speakers and the encouragement and support of the women there. It aligned so perfectly with my values and what I've been trying to do in our organization. For example, one of the things we have is an in-house initiative called the *Public Works Women's Leadership Council*. We started it in 2004 to empower women in civil engineering and other professions here, including transportation. We also have a yearly conference that gives women an opportunity to advance their careers through the development of essential skills, like public speaking. And we have an award-winning STEM program, where we reach out to local schools. Professional engineers, mostly women, go out to schools and encourage students, particularly female students, to join the profession and study math and science and consider engineering as a profession.

"But WTS-LA also has a very profound personal meaning to me. Advancing women in transportation aligns perfectly with my leadership philosophy, what I've tried to do at Public Works. I was the first division chief to achieve a gender balance within the engineering ranks. Even among the executive-level staff, we also have a 50-50 split in terms of gender. And that's the first time we've achieved that as an organization. If you look at executive-level staff around the world, well, let's just say I'm very proud of that achievement. This is really a neat time to be blessed with funding and a diverse executive staff and workforce."

Mark Pestrella believes that everyone has their own unique story. And he loves to hear them. But beyond his natural curiosity, he listens to those stories for important reasons. He believes they're a key to leadership. He integrates a profound respect for the individual into a collective philosophy of diversity, inclusion, and equity that informs each and every decision he makes, and subsequently many at Public Works. In short, Mark Pestrella succeeds at one of the most difficult public service jobs in the world by being a fair, equitable, and inclusive leader.