

Tamar Fuhrer: Volunteering for Greater Insight



Tamar Fuhrer (Metro Transportation Planning manager), Photos by John Livzey, 2017

Many WTS-LA members use the chapter as a mirror to gain perspective and clarity on their profession. Metro Transportation Planning manager Tamar Fuhrer doesn't have to do that. Structurally, her work at Metro in many ways reflects what she's doing as chair of the WTS-LA Volunteer Committee.

"Though I'm a transportation planning manager, I'm currently working in the Office of Extraordinary Innovation (OEI). The OEI was started by Metro CEO Phil Washington to examine how Metro can work better with the private sector to do more innovative and progressive work, to look at ways of doing business differently for procurement, funding, implementation, etc. And OEI is doing amazing things, including welcoming unsolicited proposals from the private sector, so that they don't have to wait to bring us a great idea. But OEI also developed an internal fellowship program that's really giving people a unique opportunity at Metro.

"Annually, the program allows two employees from other Metro departments to experience OEI firsthand. They spend a year working full time as a member of OEI. The idea is that when you can apply your knowledge from your home department during your fellowship, and when you go back to your original department, you bring the knowledge of OEI and how we can all work better together. It's designed to give people the bigger picture through experience. Right now, I'm in OEI as a fellow of that program. And in a lot of ways that mirrors my experience with WTS-LA."



Ms. Fuhrer first got involved with WTS-LA as a volunteer. Working on programs by helping out with registration and post-conference reconciliation, she enjoyed the work and exposure immensely, but was uncertain as to how to increase her involvement. An opportunity arose for her to tweet for the WTS-LA Twitter stream, and Ms. Fuhrer jumped at the chance. She managed the WTS-LA Twitter stream for two years when former WTS-LA President Alexandra Spencer noticed that she wanted to get more involved.

“Alex helped and that was critical, because it was clear that the path wasn’t codified or written down anywhere as to how to advance within WTS-LA. So, that’s one of the things I’m working on as Volunteer Committee chair. WTS-LA offers a lot of opportunities for volunteers to grow through mentorship, and reach within virtually every committee and facet of WTS-LA. Just like my experience at Metro in the OEI, being on the Volunteer Committee means that I touch every committee to determine their volunteer needs. I reach out to all of the other committee chairs and in doing so learn about what they do, so that I can fit volunteers purposefully for their needs. I really want to avoid a situation where a volunteer wants to be involved and I have to guess as to what committee needs people. I want to match people up by skill, desire, experience, and a host of other important criteria. I’m also working to update and streamline the volunteer list to make it more of an active, dynamic tool for the chapter. It should better reflect both the chapter’s and volunteers’ needs.”

But Ms. Fuhrer’s desire to improve the Volunteer Committee’s effectiveness didn’t happen in a vacuum.

“As committee chair, I report to [vice president, Programs & Professional Development and Mott MacDonald senior project engineer] Lisa Karwoski. And she’s been great about working with me and helping me with the transition. And [chapter historian and WSP transportation engineer] Kyra Tao was also really helpful in getting me up to speed in the work that she was doing before me as Volunteer chair. There’s always growing pains, but they were both really helpful, and it’s great when you have support from people that have held that position or who oversee it.”

So, how does Tamar Fuhrer envision her future with WTS-LA?

“First, I’d love to stay involved on the board. And again, one of the great things about being chair of the Volunteer Committee is that you get to see what every other committee is doing. You get a better sense of where you can fit in down the road, where you can be the most helpful. WTS-LA is really such a great organization. For example, last year I participated in the Mid-Career Leadership Program and everyone involved was on a committee, on the board, or just a very active member. Again, in a lot of ways WTS-LA mirrors my experience at Metro. So, I don’t know what specific role I’ll play in WTS-LA in the future, but I definitely see my future in WTS-LA. For now, I just want to focus on the Volunteer Committee and do the best I can with that. And I encourage *anyone* who’s interested in volunteering to reach out to me. There are so many opportunities to grow in WTS-LA and volunteering opens them up.”

WTS-LA members often use the chapter as a mirror to gain perspective on their jobs. They should. That’s one of its functions. But Tamar Fuhrer doesn’t need the chapter for that. For her, WTS-LA and Metro are so well aligned, that she gets to use her skills and experience to help improve both. And as Volunteer Committee chair, that is exactly what she’s doing.