

Dr. Allison Yoh and POLB: A Port of Entrée



Dr. Allison Yoh (Director of Planning at Port of Long Beach), Photos © John Livzey, 2018

In advancing transportation planning at the Port of Long Beach (POLB) as its director, Dr. Allison Yoh sees her role as, well, complicated.

“It’s important to realize that though we are a harbor and enterprise department of the City of Long Beach, we’re also part of the San Pedro Bay Port Complex with the Port of Los Angeles (POLA). We share much of the same infrastructure, the same water, and the same air with our neighboring port. And on many of those issues, we work very closely, particularly in planning, operations, and policy. Recently, the two ports, together with Metro and the Alameda Corridor East Construction Authority, partnered on a successful application to the SB1 Trade Corridors Enhancement Program for funding to improve rail infrastructure in Southern California. So, even though the two Ports may be fierce competitors when it comes to business, on infrastructure and planning, we work very closely together. It’s like having two businesses living in the same house.”

With that in mind, Dr. Yoh sees her mandate at POLB as having three primary focus areas.

“First, I oversee the technical studies on transportation that support our environmental documents, trying to understand the transportation-related effects of future investments in infrastructure, while supporting and analyzing local, state, and federal policies that affect the port. Next, we conduct multi-modal transportation planning, which ranges from bicycle planning to roadways and the rail network. And third, we seek transportation funding opportunities and grants to support our projects and initiatives—and that requires that we maintain active relationships with our funding partners and other local, state, and federal transportation agencies. Those are the three main functions, but on a broader level, much of that is really ensuring that the port is an efficient transportation hub, supporting the region’s environmental goals and objectives and contributing to the nation’s economy.”



Though very much a business—POLB is the second busiest US container port behind only POLA—POLB also takes its environmental role most seriously. And it has for many years, achieving many environmental/sustainable firsts, including the first US port to implement cold ironing for ships.

“We are known as The Green Port, and we routinely win environmental awards for sustainability and green best practices. This started with some of the early actions we took through our Clean Air Action Plan, and it’s something we continue today. But this is also driven by our board’s mission and vision to be a truly sustainable port. They support both the economic activities and the environmental needs. It’s also about perspective. It comes from a strong, robust understanding that it’s not about business versus community or economy versus environment. We always strive to make those ‘and-and’ equations. We’re located in one of America’s densest and most populated regions. So, we have to take into account the communities that are affected by port operations. But we’re also a transportation hub of national significance. We have national economic accountability as well.

“Another initiative we’re working on is using our data more efficiently, better integrating it into operational efficiencies. We’re partnering with GE Transportation Systems to identify and link multiple streams of data together so that there’s more visibility in the transportation supply chain. Ultimately, we want to use data to make operations more efficient. It’s a pilot demonstration project that POLA started and we’re expanding into POLB terminals. But we also want to extend it further into other modal information areas to manage truck turn times, local roadway conditions, freeway information, etc. We want to expand that visibility into the regional geography as well to maximize economic activity and environmental stewardship.”

Dr. Yoh believes strongly in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration. It’s key to her success at POLB. But to reach her position at POLB, she credits several people, an institution, and a very familiar organization, where she serves as a Director at Large.

“I was familiar with WTS-LA and had participated in events when I was a master’s and doctoral student at UCLA. But after I graduated, I went into research and education administration at UCLA for five years, co-directing two research centers there. When I started getting more involved at the port, I also started getting more involved with WTS-LA. I was recruited by [Director, Mid-Pacific Gateway Office, USDOT Maritime Administration] Eric Shen, who is also a WTS-LA Director at Large. He encouraged me to participate more actively. And that was really helpful, as it made me look back at where my career began, as well as look forward.

“In looking back on my career and how I got here—I saw that it was due in large part to the many invaluable mentors and sponsors throughout my academic and professional career. For example, [UCLA urban planning professor] Brian Taylor was not only a mentor for me at UCLA, but he was also a sponsor, a champion, an advocate, who was always looking out for academic and professional opportunities for me. That is essential for anyone to meaningfully advance. And that’s exactly what WTS-LA provides.

“WTS-LA is a great place for people to find those types of opportunities and that kind of support. The programs that are offered are especially important for students and early career transportation professionals. So, I wanted to help the organization in that sense and promote its mission, while engaging with the new generation of transportation planners. That mentorship, that sponsorship—whether it’s one on one or in groups—is critically important, particularly for women.”

As the Director of Transportation Planning at the Port of Long Beach, Dr. Allison Yoh sees her role as, well, complicated. Fortunately, for the next generation of transportation planners and professionals, she’s making the process of reaching that position much less complex.