

## For Caltrans District 7 Director Carrie Bowen, SB1 Fits the Thrill



*Carrie Bowen (Caltrans District 7 Director), Photos © John Livzey, 2018*

A significant number of countries in this world handle smaller and less complex transportation systems than Caltrans District 7 Director Carrie Bowen. But for Ms. Bowen, the focus is always on the people she serves and her team.

“I’m going to brag a bit here, because I am so proud of the work my team does. But it’s not always what you think. Yes, we build and fix transportation infrastructure. But also when you look at the fires and the floods and any kind of emergency in California, the unofficial first responders on the scene are often Caltrans workers. They help people caught in fires, mudslides, car accidents, even people trapped in houses. And they help first responders in their critical work. That’s on top of the already magnificent job they do for transportation. They’re amazing people and I’m so proud of them and what they do.”

Passionate about her people’s safety, Ms. Bowen is equally excited about the passage of the 2017 landmark transportation bill, the Road Repair and Accountability Act known as SB1. The bill promises to provide an average of \$5.4 billion annually over the next decade to improve California’s transportation infrastructure. For Ms. Bowen and District 7, SB1 is a real game changer.

“SB 1 essentially doubled the amount of money for transportation, so there’s going to be so much construction work going on. So, I want to remind *everyone* that when you see construction work of any kind, please slow down. Please put your phone down. And please pay attention. Your vehicle weighs 5,000 pounds or more, and many times our workers are only protected by a 10-pound cone. I’ve had too many employees injured and even killed. So, please be careful. This is very dangerous and necessary work. They put their lives on the line for all of us. So, let’s help them out.”

“District 7 is the biggest district in the state. We include Los Angeles and Ventura counties, so we host 24% of the state’s population. We also have seven of the ten most congested corridors in the US. Commuters spend about 102 hours per year stuck in traffic. That’s part of our reality in living here. But with SB1 we’ll be able to do so much including fixing 600 lane miles of pavement, 119 bridges, 7,000 culverts, 50 linear miles of guardrail, and 800 signs, for example. People don’t realize, but traffic signs are very expensive and difficult to replace. And the ones in LA and Ventura have been graffitied and cleaned and graffitied and cleaned so many times that they’re hard to read. That’s dangerous. Without SB1 funding, in Ventura, they’d have to wait 20 years to replace them. We’re also going to be able to add ramp meters, traffic cameras, and electric highway message signs. But all of that is just a small part of what SB 1 represents.”

Ms. Bowen and her team look to deliver 34 SB1 projects valued at just under \$1 billion. But those projects will also generate roughly 13,000 direct jobs and thousands more ancillary ones as well. Five projects in

Ventura County alone are worth \$25.6 million and will create roughly 1,200 jobs. She also cites the safety value of many of the projects including the \$79 million Rice Avenue/State Route 34 Railroad Grade Separation project in Oxnard, currently the third most dangerous intersection in the state. She and her team look to finish that project in 2022.



“One of the challenges we have is to get the story out about how valuable these projects really are, what they’ll mean to the traveling public in terms of safety and efficiency. For example, we’ll be able to fix

the pavement and upgrade our technology, our ITS technology. We’re going to install our 6-inch striping. Now to most people, striping is not particularly interesting, but to me it’s very exciting. It will prevent accidents, lane drifting, and save money on car repairs. We have three pavement projects that have already been completed with SB1 funding. People are already driving on them. But people just don’t get excited about paving, because they just don’t know what it means.

“Culverts are another example. To most people, culverts are not exhilarating. But given the rain and mudslides we’ve had, cleaning culverts and replacing storm drains is critically important; it’s lifesaving in certain cases. But it’s very difficult to explain why fixing a storm drain or a culvert is dynamic. So we need to get better at explaining to people how their money is being spent. We told them we’d fix potholes and pavement and bridges and that’s exactly what we’re doing. We want to make sure that people know that the money they set aside is being used exactly the way it was meant for. When we do that, people will get excited to drive on better roads and take improved transit.”

But Ms. Bowen is quick to point out that SB1 also provides benefits well beyond transportation infrastructure. In addition to creating jobs, it’s also creating job opportunities.

“The small-business component of SB1 was of absolute importance to the governor and the legislature. Here in Southern California, they set a goal that 25% of SB1 funding must be set aside for small and minority businesses. That’s not just for Caltrans. That’s also for all of the agencies involved. So, anyone that gets SB1 dollars must also adhere to that goal. And the multiplier effect will mean even more jobs for underutilized businesses and underserved communities.

“While SB1 is creating job opportunities, Ms. Bowen also notes that there is a critical shortage of transportation and trade professionals, a shortage that is only becoming more severe. In addition to SB1 provisions, she’s looking to a certain professional association to help supply the next generation of transportation professionals.

“Right now, there is a tremendous need for transportation professionals and related professionals. And as the Baby Boomers start retiring, we’re going to need even more people in our workforce. And that’s where WTS-LA can be most effective. I first heard about WTS when I was still in Fresno. Fresno didn’t have a chapter so I went to a program in Sacramento. When I moved to Los Angeles, I got involved right away. I joined WTS-LA and was asked to be on the board. And that was perfect. I got involved in helping to set up speakers for different programs and I got to know the wonderful people on the board. But most importantly, I saw the potential for what WTS-LA can bring to the equation to help women advance in transportation.

“From academia to the trades, we know we’re going to need women in all areas of transportation. Planning, business—every aspect you can think of needs people. WTS-LA can play a key role in ensuring that the word gets out that the transportation industry in Southern California is hiring. But what makes WTS-LA unique is its ability to inform, educate, and inspire people to join the transportation industry. It

demonstrates that women can rise to positions of power. And that's invaluable. But it also trains people. I'm a mentor in the mentoring program and I'm the first to admit that I learned a lot from my mentee. Hopefully, she gained some knowledge from me as well, but either way it has been a lot of fun. More importantly for me, the mentoring process really made me think about the things that I learned and put them in a context to share them with someone else. And that helped me a lot."

Though modest, Carrie Bowen handles a transportation system that rivals that of many countries. The first woman and non-engineer to serve as District 7 director, her focus is resolute: it's about the people and the mission.

"From our ports to our universities to the film industry—we've got it all. Now, with SB1 we have the money to enhance our transportation system to better serve our industries and our quality of life. We've got the money. We've got the projects. We know what to do and now we just need the workforce to do it. WTS-LA can help us grow that workforce into the leaders we want them to be and the ones we need."