

The Port of Los Angeles Sets a New Standard by Doing What It's Always Done



Sue Lai, (P.E., Sr. Transportation Engineer), Dina Aryan-Zahlan (P.E., PMP, Assistant Chief Harbor Engineer and WTS-LA Director), Mimi Gutierrez (Civil Engineering Associate from the Port of Los Angeles), Photos © John Livzey, 2018

There's something very unusual going on at the Port of Los Angeles (POLA), something that truly sets it apart from virtually every other port in the world. And while it may be unusual, it's not new for the port and it speaks directly to WTS-LA's mission.

POLA has an exceptional number of professional women in its engineering division, almost 30 percent, which is twice the national average. Even more extraordinary, it has been that way for quite some time. In fact, on a very real level, diversity has been institutionalized at POLA, making for a "warm and supportive environment," particularly in the engineering division.

POLA senior transportation engineer Sue Lai agrees. "I know I make an effort—and I know Dina (Aryan-Zahlan) and Mimi (Gutierrez) do as well—to always bring younger women engineers under my wing. I'm one of the more experienced people in our division, and I just want to make sure that the new hires know that I'm around, that I'm there for them. And that's not just for engineers, but for women in general. They know that if they have any questions or need any kind of guidance, I'm happy to share my experience with them and help them." POLA civil engineering associate, Mimi Gutierrez adds, "There are also various opportunities for women to work on diverse projects from highways and roadways to waterway improvements to public access and beautification improvements."



"Family comes first, along with the port priorities here in the engineering division," adds Dina Aryan-Zahlan, POLA assistant chief harbor engineer. "You can be both a working professional and a mom here. It's not an either/or proposition. You get to wear the 'mom' hat and the 'professional' hat. This contributes directly to the success of our port projects. We deliver these \$100 million projects on time and on budget with complete transparency. It's really just the culture at this point."

Ms. Aryan-Zahlan makes a good point. A notably progressive agency, POLA was one of the first ports—and certainly the largest—to have a female executive director. POLA is the largest US port. And as for the port's history, these women know it because they helped make it. A second generation traffic engineer, Ms. Lai has worked for the city for 27 years, the first ten with LADOT and the last 17 with POLA. Ms. Gutierrez has called POLA home for the last 15 years. And Ms. Aryan-Zahlan has punched a city time clock for the last 30 years ("Of course, I started at the age of ten..."), the first 11 years at the Bureau of

Engineering and the last 19 years at POLA. Together, the women helped create one of the port's most important strategic initiatives to improve surface transportation. Ms. Lai explains.



“We started off with a transportation master plan, which we completed in 2008. That was really a recipe for the improvements the port needed to make to meet traffic conditions for the future. The master plan identified eight improvements and the port has, so far, moved forward with six of those improvements. They include a grade separation and two major improvements to the port’s connection to the 110 Freeway, the major freeway abutting POLA. We also obtained close to \$80 million of grant funding for the construction of these projects.”

“It was perfect timing,” adds Ms. Gutierrez. “The master plan showed that traffic volumes were going to increase so dramatically that we needed to immediately start design and construction to accommodate the traffic flow. The three of us worked together on the master plan, and Dina, as harbor engineer, was key to having it completed. The construction that Sue’s team implemented was perfect timing for us to meet the current demand and future volumes.”

A seminal part of the port’s strategic outlook, the master plan still helps drive the port’s success today. Of course, once the plan was completed, the women didn’t rest on their laurels. They turned to implementation and future plans. Today, they’re working on several compelling component projects, many that harken back to the original plan.

“I am working on a variety of projects right now,” explains Ms. Gutierrez. “One of them is the Waterside Emergency Access project. We’re providing emergency access via waterside for fireboats. When a first responder needs to get to a fire or other emergency on the terminal, we’re finding that often there is congestion at the gate because of all of the trucks. Sometimes, fire trucks simply can’t get to the terminals quickly. So, we’re providing waterside emergency access via fireboats so that they can be the first responders on the scene.”

“We’re also providing a meeting point for first responders no matter what the emergency is at the terminal,” adds Ms. Lai. “By doing it via waterside, it enables a quicker response than by land. A labor representative came up with the idea. He came to the port with the idea and we brought together the fire department and the terminal operators and we all worked together. Mimi worked with everyone. This is a very new idea; it’s one of the first of its kind in the nation. Our sister port, the Port of Long Beach, is considering adopting it as well. We sent them our design and they’re going to adapt it to their circumstances.” Ms. Aryan-Zahlan’s current focus also promises to reshape the port in another way.



“I’m working on the development of the LA Waterfront in both San Pedro and Wilmington. The intent is to bring the waterfront closer to our adjacent communities. The LA Waterfront bridges the gap between a working port and the community to create a fun place of recreation and information about what we do here. It’s a \$1.3+ billion, 30-year endeavor. We’ve already spent \$600 million in the last decade for

operations, capital improvements, and maintenance. And we're committed to investing at least another \$400 million to fully realize the LA Waterfront vision.

"We've just completed the Harbor Boulevard roadway realignment and we're working with the San Pedro Public Market development team for the former Ports O'Call site. Beautification to the town square in front of the Maritime Museum is in design, along with 3,600 linear feet of promenade along the water's edge. Wilmington has a smaller waterfront, but we want to make sure that we provide access for the community as well. We have plans to provide a gateway and pedestrian bridge from the Wilmington Waterfront Park connecting to its waterfront." Collectively, all of the women at POLA share the responsibility for billions of dollars in projects. While they credit the culture and support at POLA—and deservedly so—there's another organization they feel is also pivotal to their success.

"I was the Scholarship chair for WTS-LA a while back," explains Ms. Lai. "Then I moved on to the international level with WTS Scholarships. We rebranded and expanded the scholarship scope to the WTS Foundation under my leadership. WTS has always been important to me. And it's also important to the port. We always make sure that we have representation at all of the international conferences as well as many of the local programs and events. We set aside funds for about 15 memberships in our annual budget, specifically for WTS-LA. We also budget for at least two people to go to the international conference. We're committed to WTS and WTS-LA because of their mission and because of what it brings to the port."

Ms. Aryan-Zahlan, also currently a WTS-LA Director-at-Large, adds, "It's always comforting to know that WTS-LA is there as a resource when you need it. Whether it's for networking or information or just to talk to someone. And we make sure our people are available for the chapter. For example, we have great engineers, like Mahsa Pan, PE, CCM, WTS-LA Mentorship and Professional Development/Leadership Chair, who participate meaningfully. WTS-LA gives us a chance to expand our horizons and see how women at other agencies are doing things. It keeps us current on the transportation industry. Additionally, if the chapter needs something from me or the port, I make sure that we deliver."

There's something very unusual going on at the Port of Los Angeles. And it sets the port apart from almost every other port in the world. Fortunately, it's a truly wonderful thing that serves as a model for WTS-LA's mission.