

Kim Avila believes strongly in going public...



Kim Avila (ICF CEQA/NEPA transportation infrastructure strategist), Photos © John Livzey, 2019

"[WTS-LA] bring in the best speakers, and their credibility is unparalleled. So, they attract the best people as well. But there's also something about the vibe at a WTS-LA event that feels more personal."

For some people, a career in public service is never a question. It's a certainty. But not everyone follows a typical path in that regard. From the start, ICF CEQA/NEPA transportation infrastructure strategist Kim Avila wanted to use her skills and talents to benefit the greater good. The only question that remained was, "How?"

"I always thought I'd be a city manager running a bedroom community like San Dimas," she explains. "I always wanted to go into public service. When I worked for the City of San Dimas, I had a manager/mentor who said to me, 'I see you managing very large teams.' And her words stuck with me. Then I worked in ICF's Sacramento office and was working on several federal and state transportation projects. And I realized that the I-want-to-run-a-city-urge from my 20s changed. In my 30s, it became an awareness that I could do more on the consultant side."



"As a consultant, I serve the public throughout the state and the country and even overseas. You don't have to be a public sector employee to have the public service ethos. I don't think anyone goes into transportation infrastructure, design and planning, or environmental clearance because they are a moneymaker. You don't get into this business because you think you're going to get rich. So, it's always been really important to me to surround myself with people who have that public sector ethos."

Today, she uses that ethos to perform environmental compliance via environmental impact reports on a range of transportation projects for ICF. But with the passage of SB1 and Measures R and M, things in environmental clearance have changed. Ms. Avila reports that she's seeing many more CEQA-only documents, as transportation agencies and clients have been using state funding only for projects. She also notes that state CEQA rules are generally more stringent than federal NEPA rules. And though her

portfolio contains a range of transportation modes, there is one project that she finds particularly fascinating.

“A couple of days ago, the California High-Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA) was just given NEPA Assignment. That gives them the ability to move forward with their environmental documents, which are combined CEQA/NEPA. This allows the high-speed rail program to move forward, after having been blocked for the past year or so. I’m working on the San Jose to Merced segment, which goes through downtown Gilroy. I’ve been working on that for the last three years, but I’ve been working on high-speed rail for most of the 2000s. I’ve even worked on high-speed rail overseas. It’s a real passion of mine. Seeing it being planned and designed across the country is really exciting. I’ve traveled on it in Europe, and I’m amazed by it. I can’t wait until we have it here.”

A Los Angeles native, Ms. Avila holds a special place in her heart for rail and for transit.

“I grew up in LA and went away to college in the 80s and 90s. When I left there wasn’t more than a bus system. But when I came back, there was a Metro rail map! I grew up in San Gabriel and would take the Pico bus to the beach in Santa Monica, and it would take a couple of hours. But now I look at what Metro has done and the rail network and how it will combine with high-speed rail—in my hometown! And all I can say is, “Go Metro!”

She also reports that another organization has been integral to her success, an organization she’s been a part of her entire professional career.

“I’ve been a WTS-LA member in LA and was also a member of the San Francisco Bay Area chapter when I lived there for 10 years. I participated in both, and they’re both great chapters. One interesting difference, though, is that in San Francisco the chapter was all women. Here in LA, it’s about a 50/50 split between women and men, which always impressed me. And WTS-LA is an organization that everyone has to pay attention to. They bring in the best speakers, and their credibility is unparalleled. So, they attract the best people as well. But there’s also something about the vibe at a WTS-LA event that feels more personal.

“When people come in and give presentations, it feels like they’re trying to impart more than just industry knowledge and advice. It’s almost like they’re trying to connect with WTS-LA members. It’s just very personal. It’s also true that whenever someone from WTS contacts someone else from WTS, everything else becomes secondary; if you’re in WTS, you’re welcome. And that helps make the organization great. Also, I’m a big believer in mentoring. I’ve had fantastic mentors throughout my career, and I always try to be a cheerleader for folks now. Last year I was involved with the WTS-LA mentoring program and I highly recommend it. I also helped with the Annual Scholarship and Awards dinner, and I look to get more involved this year.”

Though she may not have followed a traditional path, Kim Avila has fashioned an exemplary career in service of the public good.