AN INTERVIEW WITH AASHTO PRESIDENT

CARLOS BRACERAS

BY ETHEL NAVALES

When Carlos Braceras first stumbled upon a sign in 1986 advertising summer internships at the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), he had no idea that this ad would soon change the entire course of his professional career.

Just a few years earlier, Carlos had earned a degree in Geology from the University of Vermont before ultimately deciding to pursue a degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Utah. It was there in the engineering building that Carlos learned of this internship and set his sights on UDOT—the department he would build his career in for the next 32 years.

During these years with UDOT, Carlos served as Deputy Director, Director of UDOT's Region Three Office, Chief Geotechnical Engineer, Chief Value Engineer and Roadway Design Engineer. He was named the "1998 State of Utah Governor's Manager of the Year" and was the 1998 recipient of the "UDOT Leader of the Year" Award. Today, Carlos is UDOT's Executive Director. In this role, he is responsible for over 1,600 employees and the design, construction and maintenance of Utah's 6,000-mile system of roads and highways.

A major highlight to Carlos' professional career recently took place on September 2018, when he was elected President of the American Association of State and Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO). With years of dedication as an AASHTO member and leader, this position is certainly well-deserved. As an entire association looks to Carlos for guidance, we are excited to see what he has in store for the future of the transportation industry.

Please tell us about your professional career and how you first got involved with the Utah Department of Transportation.

I majored in Geology with the goal of being in the oil and gas business. In 1986, I found an ad for a rotational engineering program at UDOT. Since then, I have been involved in different aspects of the business such as design, pre-construction and construction, geotech engineering and administration.

What do you find most rewarding about your career thus far?

The work we do makes people's lives better—from access to economic opportunities to saving lives on our roadways. I am very proud that we are a value-driven organization. Another rewarding part about my job is the ability to help our employees do more than they ever realized they could do. My professional accomplishments are really the accomplishments of these individuals.

What are your responsibilities and goals as the Executive Director of UDOT?

I am responsible for fulfilling my department's vision of keeping Utah moving. We will accomplish this by focusing on our three strategic goals: have zero fatalities, preserve infrastructure and optimize mobility.

You were recently elected as President of the American Association of State and Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO). Can you tell us more about this association and what this position means to you?

AASHTO is a nationwide transportation association that sets the vision for the nation's transportation system and standards. The organization also serves as the voice for the transportation industry, particularly when working with the White House and Congress. As

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President, I'm focused on workforce development, reauthorization of a surface transportation authorization that expires in 2020, and communicating the vital role transportation plays for economic vitality and quality of life in our communities.

Please describe your involvement with AASHTO prior to becoming President.

I have been involved with AASHTO for over 20 years in various capacities, such as past chair of the maintenance committee and design committee. Additionally, I served as the first and only chair for the AASHTO center of enviro excellence, as well as the secretary treasurer for the association.

What are the key reasons you wanted to take on this responsibility?

Being involved in AASHTO has been one of the most rewarding professional experiences in my career. With this newly appointed position, I can give back to the transportation industry and work to improve the industry. Of course, I always find that I get out more than I put in.

What do you want AASHTO members to know about you?

I would want them to know that I'm 100 percent committed to the organization and to giving a voice to all 52 members. The strength of our association is magnified when it represents the diversity of our members.

You pointed out that Departments of Transportation need to consider their role as owners. Can you expand on that idea?

Traditionally, DOTs have been focused on building and maintaining roads and bridges. Today, we have to think about operating an entire transportation system that includes all different modes. It's about connecting people to their journeys.

You're an advocate for innovative ways to meet customer needs. What are some examples of this?

Take Utah as an example. It is a fast growing state and it needs to understand users and meet the future demands of users. By creating a two-way dialogue with our communities and local governments, we ensure that these groups are heard and have a voice in shaping transportation solutions.

You mentioned that you are focusing your efforts on three specific areas: workforce development, reauthorization of funding legislation and communicating the value of transportation. Why is each one a priority?

In regards to workforce development, our workforce skills are going to have to evolve to meet future needs, so we must focus on finding ways to prepare our workforce for the growing digital/technological world. As for the reauthorization of the federal transportation bill, there is a definite need for a national transportation system. We need it to be competitive on the national stage and have a world-class transportation system that's appropriately funded. As I've previously mentioned, AASHTO sets the vision for the nation's transportation system and serves as the voice for the transportation industry when working with the White House and Congress. Finally, the goal of communicating the value of transportation speaks for itself. Our responsibility is discovering even better ways to do so.

What advice do you have for other Departments of Transportation to improve their partnership with IRWA and work towards achieving a common goal?

Partnerships will be fundamental in reaching our transportation goals to improve people's quality of life. We are in this together. We are living in a world of rapid change, and with the growth in technology and population, the future belongs to those that adhere to their values and maintain partnerships.

Carlos with IRWA's International Secretary, James A. Olschewski, SR/WA. Carlos serves as UDOT's Executive Director, while James serves as UDOT's Right of Way Design Program Manager.

What do you want IRWA members to know about you?

I appreciate IRWA's focus to help right of way professionals continue to grow. Acquisition of private property is often considered the "scariest" power that a public agency has, so having better-trained professionals can help ensure a better outcome.

Ideally, where would you like to see yourself in 10 years?

I hope that I will still have the opportunity to be involved in transportation and the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives.

What advice do you have for any newcomers to the industry?

I encourage the upcoming generation of transportation officials to get involved in professional associations such as AASHTO and IRWA. They will help you develop relationships that will inspire you to improve yourself, your career and those around you.

In a recent video to your employees, you mentioned that you aren't going anywhere anytime soon. What would you have liked to tell yourself 10 years ago?

Time is short and moves very fast, so you need to make a difference today. You can't wait until tomorrow. Have big dreams and work hard towards your goals.

What do you envision for the future of AASHTO after your Presidency is complete?

AASHTO is much bigger than just one individual. I hope that I will play some small part to make a difference, but AASHTO will continue to be the trusted transportation expert that will help guide and support its members, as well as the transportation of the future. ✪