

Connecting the Dots: From Civic Engagement to Transportation Policy and Planning

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MTI interviewed David Kim, Senior Vice President and Principal of National Transportation Policy and Multimodal Strategy for WSP USA, to learn more about his background and success as a leader in transportation.

Inspired from the Beginning

How did you first become involved in transportation?

My parents—they came from Korea in the late 50s and were actively involved in the community and civic life—instilled great values in me. They were true believers in the idea that it's important for all of us to have a voice, to use it and to speak up for ourselves and our community. They taught me so many lessons of civic engagement as a kid in Davis, CA. Then I lived in LA for about a decade as a young adult. And it goes without saying that anyone who spends any amount of time in LA will have some thoughts about transportation.

But people still ask me: why transportation?

It goes all the way back to the opening of the BART system in the '70s when I was in elementary school. One day, my dad suggested we take a ride on the brand-new subway system. So, the entire family went, and I was completely mesmerized by the experience. The subway was clean, modern, and state of the art at that time. And a portion of the BART system is elevated, so you're gliding over Berkeley, Oakland, and other parts of the East Bay and watching the world go by. I was hooked.

Another equally formative experience was taking Amtrak for the first time, in its early days. My family and I went on a summer vacation to Vancouver, British Columbia. We took Amtrak from Davis to Vancouver, a two-day trip. The experience was unforgettable.

So, I guess you could say BART and Amtrak were responsible for planting a seed inside a young kid—and that seed would eventually turn into a career in transportation.

A few years later, I found myself working for State Senator David Roberti right after college. That's when I saw transportation planning and project delivery up close. LA's metrorail subway system was being developed and I attended countless meetings with the transit agency. I also spent hours with homeowner groups, businesses, and other stakeholders who had strong views on the proposed alignment. Some were opposed, some were supportive, but all had a stake in the outcome. The experience really opened my eyes to transportation infrastructure and its potential to transform a



community and change lives. It also gave me a glimpse into the nuts and bolts of transportation planning and the politics surrounding it.

Then, while attending graduate school, we learned about the nature of intergovernmental relationships. How do federal, state and local governments interact with one another? To what degree is the relationship cooperative, contentious or nonexistent? Transportation perfectly exemplifies the importance of intergovernmental coordination and partnership.

Working on transportation issues for Senator Roberti while attending graduate school led me to decide, perhaps unconsciously, that I would “major” in transportation. In other words, of all the policy issues one could work on—and I covered a whole bunch of them—transportation was the area I would try to focus on more than any other because I found it not only interesting, but impactful and relevant to everyone’s lives.

Improving Mobility for Everyone

How do you envision the future of sustainable, inclusive transportation?

There’s a tendency among many to focus obsessively on electric vehicles as THE solution to climate change. EV’s are undoubtedly a big part of the solution. However, they’re just one tool in the toolbox. Much more must be done to encourage greater mode shift, to get people to take transit and rail. Or walk and bike. Or use micromobility options like shared e-scooters and e-bikes.

We need to drive less and reduce our dependence on personal vehicles, even if they’re zero emission. That’s a huge culture shift in a car-oriented society. It will require fundamentally transforming the nature of our cities to make them more bike and pedestrian friendly, to redesign roadways that facilitate the movement of cars but put pedestrians and bicyclists at great risk, to establish car-free zones and so forth.

Cities are starting to build more protected bike lanes and complete streets, along with road diets and traffic calming measures, but I’d like to see these efforts accelerated. From a climate and safety standpoint, there needs to be a sense of urgency to move faster on all of these efforts.

Protecting Our Communities

AAPJ communities, including those in California, had to face a rise in hate incidents and crimes during the pandemic. How do you think this violence affected the way individuals approached using public resources in their communities, and how can we protect all transportation users?

Anti-AAPJ hate is unfortunately alive and well. We’ve seen far too many incidents on transit systems as well as other forms of transportation. But the AAPJ community has been outspoken and bold, we are not “suffering in silence.”

Additionally, I’m heartened by the fact that this has become the focus of legislative attention – [SB 1161](#) by State Senator Dave Min (who’s a good friend of mine) was signed into law by Governor Newsom last year. The bill directs the [Mineta Transportation Institute](#) to create a community survey



for California transit systems to strengthen and promote passenger safety. It's a data collection effort and the first step in addressing incidents of harassment, violence and hate against AAPI riders as well as many others, including women, seniors, LGBTQ+ individuals, passengers with disabilities and all communities of color.

Senator Min is continuing his legislative efforts through the recent introduction of SB 434, which requires California's ten largest transit systems to collect survey data (using the survey designed by MTI) towards improving ridership safety and bringing riders back to transit. SB 434 essentially builds on the first step created by SB 1611. Organizations like Stop AAPI Hate are vigorously advocating for legislative approval in Sacramento. I believe these efforts should provide encouragement to all of us that policymakers are paying attention to what's happening in our community and taking concrete action to address the situation.

How to Find Your Way in Transportation

What advice do you have for those pursuing careers in transportation or for those already in transportation wanting to make a difference?

Here are a few thoughts for those who want to pursue careers in transportation:

- Become an expert in some aspect (or aspects) of transportation.
- Build relationships and network with other transportation professionals. Work on this consistently.
- Find mentors who can guide your career growth—and by the same token, mentor those who are coming up behind you. Note: This advice is from none other than the late Secretary Norman Y. Mineta, who was a role model and inspiration to so many, myself included.
- Work on developing your leadership and interpersonal relationship skills—this is a lifelong journey, not a “one and done” exercise.
- Read transportation articles and books.
- Listen to transportation podcasts.
- Become a thought leader. Demonstrate your transportation knowledge and expertise by writing blogs and articles. Post them on LinkedIn or other social media platforms.
- Always keep learning.

About the Author



[David S. Kim](#) is a transportation executive with [WSP USA](#), a global engineering and professional services firm. In his role as Senior Vice President and Principal, National Transportation Policy and Multimodal Strategy, he works with WSP's Advisory national business line, collaborating with senior transportation executives in the public and private sector across the United States. Prior to joining WSP, he served as Secretary of the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA). A longtime transportation leader with experience in the private sector as well as all three levels of government, he was Vice President, Government Affairs for Hyundai Motor Company from 2017 to 2019. Prior to this assignment, he spent nearly eight years in senior-level roles at the U.S. Department of Transportation.