

## Getting to Know Trustee Kristin Decas

October 2024

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Mineta Transportation Institute ([MTI](#)) Trustee [Kristin Decas](#) has been CEO and Port Director of the [Port of Hueneme](#) in California since 2012. Prior to coming to the Port of Hueneme, Kristin served as CEO and Port Director at the Port of New Bedford, MA, the nation's number one value fishing port. We recently spoke to Kristin Decas about her career in maritime transportation, her role as a trailblazing leader, and the importance of connecting with the community.

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### How did you enter the transportation field, and what sparked your interest?

Fun fact, my grandmother, born in Bergen, Norway, was the granddaughter of the City's Harbor Master and daughter of a sailor of steamships. When she was eight, her family moved to Philadelphia, where her father sailed for United Fruit, today known as Chiquita, one of Port of Hueneme's top customers. You could say maritime is in my DNA, but here is my story.

I was born and raised a New Yorker for the first 18 years of my life. I received a bachelor's degree at the University of Vermont in Economics and Philosophy and earned a Master's Degree from the University of Denver in Environmental Policy and Law. After graduating from DU, I headed back east to marry my college sweetheart and landed in Wareham, MA. I launched my career in transportation with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection heading up the alternative fuels vehicle program. With long commutes from Wareham to Boston—including the element of snow in winter months—and yearning to build a family, I switched gears and took on a post with the Governor's Seaport Council, which was headquartered in a neighboring town. The Council oversaw a \$300 million state bond to invest in the deep-water ports of MA and intermodal infrastructure. This immersed me in the nuances of maritime transportation, policy, and infrastructure development.

After this jaunt, I found my way to the top job at the Port of New Bedford, with a little luck, opportune timing, and the trust of the City's new mayor. I was challenged with my first executive job in the field running the nation's top value fishing port that was complemented with commercial cargo, cruise, ferry, and recreational boating operations.

Six years later, I noticed the Port Director/CEO job posting at the Port of Hueneme and decided to go for it. During the interview process, I found I really loved the area, the community, and the Port, which made me increasingly excited about the opportunity. I am most grateful to the Board of Harbor Commissioners for giving me a shot. Now almost 12 years later, I continue to truly enjoy the job and

working with my incredible team, our most valued customers, and our wonderful community partners.

**People may think of ground transportation, which so many of us use everyday, before maritime transportation. However, just the Port of Hueneme's trade-related activities generate \$2.2 billion in annual economic impacts and spur more than 20,000 jobs. What do you wish more people knew about maritime transportation?**

To answer this question, I will bring it home a little by talking specifically about a Port Director post. I think in general people have no idea what Port Directors do for a living. I have often been asked what does your job entail? It involves oversight of port operations, a balanced budget, and business development and growth. It's influencing public policy at the state and federal level around regulation in the pipeline such as trade and tariff policy, a most relevant discussion today. It's understanding infrastructure, transportation, goods movement and the supply chain and how to prosper that network. It's about commerce, and particularly important, it's about supporting community needs and engaging in environment stewardship. It's about running an organization and creating a healthy and prosperous work environment. It's about making a difference and creating upward mobility for residents in adjacent communities. Ninety-five percent of the people that work at the Port live in Ventura County and 63% live in the neighboring communities of Port Hueneme and Oxnard. Ports and industry create well-paying, family-sustaining jobs and people need to know about that!

People should know more about how ports participate in the transportation network. In California, we have a system of Ports that work well together and help each other. Our Ports specialize in different segments, they function in different ways. Each Port is unique and strategic and serves as a vital economic engine for its region and the communities it serves. On a broader scale, as international trade grows, it is very important that our Ports are also modernized to handle new cargo flows and are able to efficiently handle the large influx of cargoes to sustain our GDP growth, but, our Ports cannot do this alone; we need large scale investment in zero emission technology and infrastructure to achieve ambitious zero emission goals, at Port of Hueneme we are committed to [zero emissions by 2030](#). The need for investment and building and training up the supply chain workforce merits significant attention.

In general, education around transportation has always presented challenges, you don't just wave a wand, and a banana appears in your fruit bowl. Public awareness is low on this front. Understanding the supply chain and the importance of infrastructure and the overarching transportation systems is key to its success and a quest our industry should pursue.

**You have been a trailblazer in transportation: the first woman to lead both the Port of New Bedford in its more than 50-year history and the Port of Hueneme in its 83-year history, and the 4th woman to chair the Association of American Port Authorities in its 112 years. What has being the first woman in these roles taught you, and what would you tell other aspiring leaders?**

One of the most challenging moments in my career was taking on the role of Port Director at the Port of New Bedford having a background in maritime, but zero experience in actual port management. I was tossed into a world with over 3,000 fishermen and a male-dominated waterfront. I turned to my then boss, and now one of my best mentors, former Mayor Lang of New Bedford. He told me to make a fist and literally would have me make fists in his office. He was telling me to believe in myself and position my mindset in such a way that I was always in the correct boxing match and could win. This small but important piece of wisdom has gotten me through many challenges, and I offer it to others. Make a fist, believe in yourself, and do what you think is right, and you will earn the respect of others no matter the task in front of you, rolling out increased commercial rates, negotiating a tough contract, implementing new policy, and so on.

**You championed a Port festival that evolved into “Feeding the Frontline” events that leverage Port customers, small business owners, volunteers, and local health clinics to bring over 1.1 million lbs. of produce and other resources to 40,500 families. What can you tell us about the importance of our industry connecting and giving back to the community?**

The maritime industry has always been deeply interconnected with the communities it serves. Ports are not just gateways for global commerce; they are integral parts of the social fabric of the community and local ecosystem, supporting jobs, businesses, and the overall economy. The partnerships and trust that are forged between the industry and communities are critical to the long-term success of the overall region, reinforcing why it’s so important for our industry to give back in meaningful ways.

The Feeding the Frontline events, which evolved from our Port Banana Festival, is a great example of how the industry can leverage its resources and partnerships to make a real difference. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic the Port heard loud and clear from the community about the challenges faced with growing food insecurity and need for support of those most disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (farmworkers, service workers, etc.). Given the need, the Port reframed its annual Banana Festival community celebration and diverted resources to a Food Distribution campaign, providing members throughout our community with access to PPE, critical food resources, vaccinations, and other health-related information. By collaborating with our Port customers, small business owners, volunteers, and local health clinics, we were able to provide over 1.5 million pounds of produce and essential resources to over 55,000 families! This effort was not

just about donating goods; it was about creating a bridge between the resources available and providing them to the people who need the most support, especially in times of crisis.

Our industry thrives when our communities thrive. We can contribute, and by doing so, we strengthen the bonds with the communities we serve, ensuring a sustainable and mutually supportive relationship. When the industry connects with the community in this way, it's not only about corporate responsibility; it's about demonstrating the role we can play as both economic and social change-makers.

**Finally, do you have any advice for those just starting out in or those perhaps interested in transportation careers?**

Hard work and taking advantage of opportunities is key to success, with one more secret ingredient—you need to have the confidence to go for it. I feel it is so important to apply for the big jobs. I was the only woman that applied for my current job out of 60 applications and guess what? I got the job! My advice to all aspiring leaders, take advantage of opportunity, work hard, and put yourself out there. It helps to seek ways to distinguish yourself from others. In other words, go the extra mile to make yourself stand out—it's very well received by those in leadership positions making the recruitment decisions.

*MTI Board of Trustees and staff enthusiastically welcome Trustee Decas and are thankful for her wisdom and thoughtful, intentional leadership. We look forward to having her as part of our leadership!*