

Getting to Know Trustee Lynda Tran

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Mineta Transportation Institute ([MTI](#)) Trustee [Lynda Tran](#) is CEO of [Lincoln Room Strategies](#) and serves on the Board of Directors for [STV Incorporated](#), a leading professional services firm that plans, designs, and manages infrastructure projects across North America. A nationally recognized leader in transportation and infrastructure policy, Tran was most recently Senior Advisor to Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Director of Public Engagement for the U.S. Department of Transportation. She also served as DOT's official Cabinet Designee to the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, an especially significant effort in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising hate crimes against these communities.

During the Obama Administration, she was director of communications for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, one of five appointees at the helm of the nation's leading automotive regulatory agency, and she previously served as communications director for then-Governor of Virginia Tim Kaine. Tran co-founded [270 Strategies](#) and has managed high-profile communications operations across government, politics, and labor—leading teams at the federal and state levels, the Democratic National Committee, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Before returning to DOT, she was a senior strategist for Breakthrough Energy, Bill Gates' network of climate-focused investment funds, nonprofit and philanthropic programs, and served on multiple advisory boards. Tran was a commentator for CBS News through the 2016, 2018, and 2020 electoral cycles.

We recently reached out to Lynda Tran to find out more about her background, her experience as an advocate and changemaker, and what drives her to make a difference through transportation.

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

I would love to tell you that I had a master plan to end up working in transportation, but the truth is that I fell into it. I had been working in and around politics for many years when I gave birth to my first child, and my friend and mentor who happened to be the head of President Obama's political team asked me about my plan for returning to work. When I said—in the most matter-of-fact way—that I expected to join the presidential reelection campaign, my friend said “absolutely not” and the next thing I knew, I got a call from the White House Liaison and two weeks later I was sitting in the chair at the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) at the [U.S. Department of Transportation](#). I had had little exposure to transportation policy up until that point, but I was immediately struck by the passion of our career civil service leaders and their dedication to keeping Americans safe on our roadways.

During that first tour of duty at DOT, I had the great privilege of helping inform key policy decisions by then-Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, NHTSA Administrator David Strickland, and White House officials—and we managed through everything from the unintended acceleration crisis impacting one of

the leading automakers to electric vehicle fires across several manufacturers. I eventually left the federal government to help cofound a consultancy where I supported clients in the advocacy, corporate, and campaign sectors, including nonprofit organizations that are continuing to make great strides around the world on everything from child poverty to climate issues to criminal justice reform.

After the last election cycle, I was pulled back into the world of transportation again when I got an unexpected phone call during a delicious but unhealthy family breakfast that my wonderful husband makes for us every week. I was enjoying my fried eggs and bacon and roasted potatoes when I got a phone call with the caller ID marked as “South Bend, Indiana.” Moments later, I was on the phone with Pete Buttigieg, and weeks later I found myself back at the Department—at the most exciting time imaginable for anyone working in transportation and infrastructure—and I will be forever grateful for everything I was able to be a part of in that role.



Secretary Pete Buttigieg often said the thing about transportation is if we do our jobs right, no one will ever notice. If our transportation system works well, it means that all kinds of people all around the country are able to move about their daily lives freely and safely, without ever having to think about it. Our communities, our friends, our colleagues are able to get to school, work, to visit our families and make connections and lead thriving lives because of the transportation system we rely on every day.

Much of transportation strategy and policymaking happens behind the scenes, but you have been a visible advocate for transportation and infrastructure for a long time. How has being in the public eye influenced your approach to leadership and communication?

Over the past 25 years, I have been in the public eye in a number of different roles, working for incredible leaders and championing causes that are near and dear to my heart. And most recently, doing the work I have to advance equity, improve safety, and advocate for billions in infrastructure investments that are laying the groundwork for a more efficient and resilient transportation system—that has been one of the greatest privileges of my professional life.

I'm also mindful that representation matters, and I am aware of my role as a woman of color sitting in the rooms where big decisions are made, what that means and how it sets up other diverse voices to be part of policymaking in the future. This awareness is one reason it meant so much to me to serve as DOT's official Cabinet Designee to the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when so many individuals from Asian communities have faced violence and discrimination, including on public transportation.

That lived experience strengthens the work we do in service of the American people—making for smarter and more relevant policies and programs overall. We need to continue to bring stakeholders into the room who may not have previously had a seat at the table. That’s what it takes to make meaningful change.

In your role as director of communications for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at the U.S. Department of Transportation, you likely faced a variety of challenges and high-pressure situations. How has leading through such situations shaped your decision-making strategies?

In my time at NHTSA, we were beset with what felt like one crisis after another. We had the unintended acceleration crisis when millions of vehicles were recalled after several tragic deaths. We had school bus crashes that left so many devastated. Then we had electric vehicle fires. I found myself continually in the middle of these challenges, troubleshooting and doing foundational work for important future policies to improve safety on all of these fronts. There was no shortage of crisis communications.

Fortunately, I am the kind of person who gets calmer the more the people around me get stressed. When the fires get bigger, I focus even further. Every crisis has challenges, which is obvious, but every crisis also has opportunities for growth. When catastrophes loom in the form of life-threatening derailments or vehicle fleet fires, or even in smaller day-to-day problems, we should remember there is never a single solution to anything. We have to respond quickly, but also take some time to understand and learn from what has happened so we can be better equipped for the future.

You are also a public engagement expert, having led federal programs, nonprofit programs, policy campaigns, and so many more. When managing broad nationwide or even global campaigns, how do you ensure messages resonate with diverse audiences?

I always say that the term “public engagement” means everything to everyone—so it means nothing unless you define it in the context in which you’re using it. During my time at the Department of Transportation, I understood it was critical that we ensure we engaged a variety of stakeholders—especially stakeholders that had been historically left out of the conversation altogether, and that this approach would require a great deal of public education and information sharing.



For DOT, I think of public engagement as three key elements. First, recognizing the landscape in which the federal government is working, when faith in our public institutions is at historic lows, I knew we had to build an army of evangelists and empower stakeholders to help us get things done where our values

and goals were aligned. Second, meaningful public engagement requires authentic feedback loops, so I make it a point to build robust relationships with advocacy groups, nonprofits, industry, and independent organizations to truly understand their priorities and where they are coming from. Finally, in the federal context, it's about convening power—connecting stakeholders to policy experts and each other to improve the transportation system for all of us.

Over the years, I have learned that the more brains in the room, the better. Early in my career, I thought that those with the most years of seniority had all the answers, but I grew to understand that the most innovative solutions often come from the fresh eyes of the newest and youngest members of your team.

Do you have any advice for sparking interest for transportation careers in the younger generation?

I believe it's on an organization to invest in future generations and make space for up-and-coming transportation professionals. One way to do that is to bring in as many interns as the team can manage. Young people deserve a front-row seat to the policy-making process, and organizations should be invested in interns and fellows in the same way interns and fellows are invested in the organization and the cause. If the next generation is giving their time and energy to the work, organizations owe these young people a rich and meaningful experience that can help them grow.

It turns out that when young people are exposed to transportation policy, they become aware how much it impacts every part of our daily lives, and the more enriching their own experience, the better advocates they become when they go back out into the world. Investing in young people means investing in new, diverse ideas and perspectives to move us forward.

Finally, can you share an accomplishment or experience in your leadership journey that you are particularly proud of?

What am I most proud of? Honestly, it's seeing all of my "babies" out in the world, running organizations themselves and helping to drive major, world-transforming change. Watching my former interns and staff grow into leaders has been one of my greatest joys.

Beyond that, I am intensely proud of everything DOT and the industry has accomplished in recent years, especially with the historic Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the day-to-day progress we've made to make getting from A to B safer and easier for everyone. And yet, I want to remind all of us, anyone who cares about transportation, not to rest on our laurels. We need to keep pushing forward, addressing the urgent issues ahead of us, including equity, access, mobility, and climate change. I encourage everyone to stay engaged, lean into the work, and collaborate with the [Office of Public Engagement](#) and the Department of Transportation as much as possible—that's how we can continue to drive progress.

MTI Board of Trustees and staff are excited to welcome Trustee Tran and are extensively grateful for her leadership and proud of her accomplishments at the DOT and beyond. We look forward to having her as part of our leadership!