



NEWS

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MTA's GOVERNMENT RELATIONS DEPARTMENT: OUT FRONT AND BEHIND THE SCENES IN EFFORTS TO SECURE FUNDING AND DEVELOP TRANSPORTATION POLICY

MTA has planned hundreds of miles of bus routes, built 48 miles of rail line to date, funded carpool lanes and bikeways, and created the Freeway Service Patrol and Emergency Call Box system. These were all at one time great ideas, but it took more than merit to get them from the planning room to the asphalt and the tracks.

It took consensus and it took money.

A small group of men and women tucked away in a corner of the 19th floor at MTA's Gateway Headquarters known collectively as Government Relations is charged with getting both.

The people of Government Relations are lobbyists. It's a word that raises the eyebrows of some, but Director Gisselle Acevedo-Franco and her colleagues say lobbyists are merely advocates, and it's a role they assume with great pride.

"Our mission is to help develop legislation and transportation policy, and to act as the voice for the more than 9 million people of Los Angeles County," says Acevedo-Franco.

"You try to build consensus at the local level, the state level, and in Congress to provide more money for transportation," says Arthur Sohikian, who goes to bat for the MTA in Congress. "At the same time many other special interests also are in the ring competing for a part of what now is a smaller pot of money."

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"Make no mistake, there's considerable passion in the debate over transportation," says Sohikian. "And you'll never get politics out of the decision-making process."

Operating with a \$2.8 billion annual budget, MTA is charged with building and operating a comprehensive transportation system. To be sure, without the federal government as a major funding partner, many of MTA's goals wouldn't be realized.

Locally, voters in Los Angeles County voted twice for half-cent sales taxes to fund transportation projects.

"Two thirds of our funding comes from local dollars," says Audrey Noda. "The effort of Government Relations to generate that level of support has proven to be very important to the success of those projects."

"Building a comprehensive transportation system is not like paving a road or filling a pothole," says Sohikian. "It's a complex process that will take billions of dollars."

"When MTA speaks to Congress, it's acting as the primary advocate for the 6.5 million people who drive their cars to work in the Los Angeles region every day, the 1 million people who will board Metro buses, and the 125,000 boarding passengers on Metro Rail and commuter rail," says Sohikian. "That's why our efforts during the reauthorization of ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991) are so important."

As bills make their way through the State Legislature, Government Relations sends out "Legislative Alerts."

"We send the alerts to our contractors, chambers of commerce, city elected officials, and League of Cities officials in hopes of quickly generating letters to Sacramento," says Claudette Moody. "It's not something we invented. It's a common technique in government relations."

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"This legislative session we'll track 200 of the hundreds of bills in Sacramento dealing with transportation issues," says Moody. "Eight bills involve the MTA specifically, and four of those deal with the structure of the MTA Board of Directors."

While relationships are important in developing support for the MTA, they're not everything.

"Just because you know somebody doesn't mean you'll be effective in this kind of work," adds Acevedo-Franco. "Knowing people is only part of what we do. Our job also calls for being creative in researching, and in some instances even writing, proposed legislation. We have to determine the implications of law if we're to come up with well written policies."

"It's not an easy job," says Sohikian. "More than 50 percent of the members of Congress who voted on ISTEA in 1991 are no longer holding those elected positions. That means we constantly have to re-educate Congress about the issues."

Term limits are creating a similar effect here in California, making the work of Government Relations even more important as elected officials, many of whom who have little historical knowledge about transportation issues, attempt to make informed decisions.

To be successful, Government Relations must convince elected officials and the public that transportation is a fundamental part of life in America. "It puts food on the table because it's about work," says Acevedo-Franco.

"Transportation accounts for 17 percent of the Gross National Product," says Sohikian. "And to stay competitive in this global economy, L.A. County must continue to build a world class transportation system."

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