



Community members consider proposed San Fernando Valley east-west busway.

## Valley Busway Project Manager Stays Calm in Eye of MTA's 'Perfect Storm'



Kevin Michel

By GARY WOSK

The 14-mile busway the MTA Board has approved to link the Metro Red Line station in North Hollywood to Warner Center in Woodland Hills – and what route it will ultimately follow – have been the all-consuming question confronting MTA Project Manager Kevin Michel 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

"I'm always going over the project alternatives and community concerns in my mind, searching for a middle ground or compromise," said Michel, "and it's true, that sometimes I have my best thoughts when I'm farthest away from MTA such as working in the garden, playing the guitar, or just taking a walk.

"I have tried to focus my thoughts on something else on my day off, but now I understand that inspiration works best to the beat of its own drummer. And since thoughts of work creep into my free time, I figure it's only fair to occasionally day dream of faraway places and beautiful beaches at work."

The Valley's Bus Rapid Transit project, with its 13 stations, will reduce travel time between the two terminuses by 20-minutes, as compared to a regular bus. It will connect such passenger magnets Pierce and Valley colleges, the Van Nuys Government Center, the Sepulveda Recreation Center, Warner Center and the NoHo Arts District.

### Air thick with tension

Although the air in the 100-plus community meetings he's participated in can be thick with tension, the Brooklyn, New York-born Michel reacts to the sometimes emotional remarks from opponents of the project with compassion and a commitment to solutions and compromise.

Michel, who earned a master's degree in public administration from Cal State Long Beach and a graduate certificate in transportation planning from UC Riverside, occasionally discusses the high decibel meetings with his younger brother,

a rock drummer.

The consensus: there is a similarity between a sold-out concert auditorium and public hearings, even though the level of applause and requests for curtain calls differ dramatically.

"You have to keep the meetings fresh, vary the delivery, the order and customize it to the audience," says Michel, a guitarist whose family lineage includes a father who played violin and a grandfather who played in a circus band.

### **Treat audience with respect**

"Whether it's the third set of songs you're performing on the same night or the 100th meeting you've scheduled in the last month, you have to treat your audience and your material with respect," he says. "The public wants to hear a person talking, who's comfortable and knowledgeable about the project, not just someone reading a prepared script."

With the Board's decision in July to name the east-west Valley route as the "locally preferred alternative" for the Bus Rapid Transit project, Michel takes consolation in knowing he played a role in getting neighborhoods involved, regardless if for or against the project.

"I'm part of a continuing and satisfying process. There's a reward in knowing that we intelligently and honestly described the project and encouraged people to become involved to help make the project better and to ensure that reasonable alternatives are looked at," he says.

"Overall, I think it's a good project; it will generate good ridership; it will make the lives of existing transit riders better and it will attract people who currently drive cars."

Michel, who actually grew up in the suburbs of Long Island, is a stickler when it comes to preparation. Before a community meeting, he makes it his business to drive along the stretch of right-of-way on which the busway will be built and explores the side streets. He's walked parts of the alignment and has taken bike rides along the entire length.

"It's quite important to learn the lay of the land, the terrain," he says. "The Valley is composed of many neighborhoods. If you approach these issues from the distance or in quick drive-bys from the major streets, you won't catch all the subtleties."

### **What neighborhoods are about**

"This way I have a sense of what the neighborhoods are about," he says, "and when people can see that you have tried to understand their neighborhood, they are more confident in working with you."

Entering a crowded room with as many as 400 boisterous and suspicious people, including media, would be enough to make anyone apprehensive. The battle-tested Michel, however, has developed a thick skin, the result of being in the trenches of public debate over a prolonged period of time.

"There is some momentary stage fright, which is part of the

process, but I quickly work through it," he says. "Nothing is ever going to be unanimous and passionate opposition is probably inevitable, but this is a legitimate process and we're doing our job when we get the communities involved."

During the most intense moments, the former planner for the City of Santa Clarita, finds himself briefly pondering why he entered the field. Credit his grandparents John and Katherine.

"When I was a kid, they used to take me around New York City and Brooklyn on subways, buses, ferry boats and trolley cars," Michel recalls. "My grandfather used to like watching construction projects, which is sort of a New York hobby, and I think from that, I ended up in a profession that helps get things built."

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