



Memories of Julian Burke

By Dana Gabbard | Apr 3, 2013 | 1 COMMENT

Kudos to the Los Angeles Times for its excellent [obituary](#) memorializing former Metro CEO Julian Burke.

His tenure was during the period when I actually attended Metro Board meetings. These days I figure between Steve Hymon of The Source, Laura Nelson of the Los Angeles Times and our own Damien Newton you don't have to attend to know the scuttlebutt about what happened. Albeit I do read selected staff reports for agenda items to educate myself.

The Times doesn't exaggerate when it describes the turmoil that Burke found when he was recruited to head Metro. Multiple "recovery plans" for the dysfunctional budget had gotten thumbs down from the feds. Land had been condemned for the east-side extension of the Red Line but the agency had no money to build it. Then Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan had labored mightily to recruit a new head for the troubled agency only to be frustrated at several turn downs including the amazing case of the [thin skinned New York transit official](#).



Photo: [##Memories of Julian Burke##Los Angeles Transportation Headlines##](#)

The L.A. Times coverage by Richard Simon of this surreal situation includes hilarious quotes by L.A. County Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Michael Antonovich — I guess they needed to laugh to forestall crying in frustration at the seemingly endless search for a new Metro CEO after the previous CEO, Joe Drew, quit in disgust in response to back stabbing sniping remarks by Board members appearing in the press. And note Simon confirms Burke was supposed to be a temporary fill-in; he ended up serving 4 years.

A high point of the Burke era is when he was able to find [20 new buses to expand the fleet](#) as I have written about previously. But what I didn't mention in my previous coverage is Burke

announced this at a Metro Board meeting, describing the extraordinary circumstances under which staff had found new equipment without the long wait that ordering from transit bus manufacturers usually entails. The Board received this news without comment, not even a simple thank you. So I used my public comment later in the meeting to express appreciation on behalf of the bus riders for what Mr. Burke had done. I think he smiled in response. Frankly it just felt like the right thing to do.



A low point was when Burke was persuaded the Metro Library was [expendable](#) and zeroed out its budget (as I mentioned in recent comments to [The Source](#)

Via heroic efforts by myself along with other concerned activists, Metro staff and the Federal Transit Administration Mr. Burke at the budget meeting mentioned in the Los Angeles Times article linked to above declared he was now aware the collection was valuable and six months for operating the Library were included in the budget while a search was conducted to find a suitable institution to donate it to. Burke said this while looking straight at me. He knew I had been behind the scenes raising Cain to save the Library. The “search” was a face saving gesture and I was confident that in six months quietly the budget would be extended for the Library and talk of closing it was over. As indeed happened. Activist John Walsh even said as much after the meeting, declaring “the library has been saved”. I have since heard that the federal agency displeasure at the proposal was the deciding factor in the last minute sea change on Burke’s part. Maybe he worried that they couldn’t risk any discord in their relationship with the FTA, a valued funding partner for the rail construction program via New Starts.

Burke in 2001 announced plans to step down. He had done what he was recruited to do and felt now what the agency needed was not a fiscal expert but someone expert in transit agency administration. That resulted in Roger Snoble coming aboard.

After that I met Mr. Burke one last time, in 2005 at the [dedication of the initial segment of the Orange Line](#). He was there because the project was initiated during his tenure. Note his quote in the Metro press release: “It’s just terrific; it’s so beautiful. The project is much better than I had ever envisioned it. It’s just wonderful.” BTW Alan Lipsky, Burke’s right hand man, was also at the event. And I was glad it gave me an opportunity to thank both of them for their efforts that saved the agency from a fiscal meltdown. Mr. Burke smiled at my praise because he knew I truly meant it and was doing it on behalf of all the riders who benefit from the projects he saved from cancellation (including MOS 3 of the Red Line, Hollywood to North Hollywood).



Farewell, Mr. Burke. You did good!

(I have invited Kymberleigh Richards, who actually engaged with Mr. Burke one-on-one more than I did, to make comments to this post sharing her perspectives and memories of an extraordinary man; they should appear within an hour or so of my post appearing)



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**K.M. Richards** • 10 years ago

Sorry that "an hour or so" turned into "three days" but time-management hasn't been one of my strong suits in recent weeks.

I liked Julian Burke. Granted, he wasn't a "transit guy" but he was the right person for the job at the time, for the reasons Dana outlined. Bringing him in may well be one of the best things Richard Riordan did during his tenure on the Metro Board.

One must remember that Metro, created by a merger of the old RTD and the L.A. County Transportation Commission, had a tumultuous first four or five years of existence. The new agency inherited not only the project list that LACTC had put in motion but also the responsibility for providing the majority of public transit service for the region. As a result, staff members of the new agency were loyal only to their previous responsibilities, and there was as much in-fighting among planners as there was among the Metro Board members. The splitting off of the eastern San Gabriel Valley into Foothill Transit, orchestrated by former County Supervisor (and LACTC commissioner) Pete Schabarum, added polarization to an already difficult situation. Julian brought order back into this chaos by essentially declaring that, since he was freezing all projects not presently under construction, the former LACTC staffers were going to have to "play nice" with the former RTD staffers if they were going to survive.

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By Damien Newton | Mar 27, 2008

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By Damien Newton | Jun 19, 2008

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By Damien Newton | Oct 2, 2008

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