



NEWS

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PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS PROVIDES BAPTISM OF FIRE FOR MTA PROJECT MANAGER

MTA rail construction is sometimes characterized as a rough and tumble arena subject to close media scrutiny.

But the intensity pales in comparison with the fishbowl, pressure-cooker environment of a presidential campaign, according to Stephen J. Polechronis, 38, project manager for Metro Red Line Segment 2.

He's qualified to make that judgment. He's been there, when he worked as an event director and advance person for the campaign of Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis in 1987-88. That campaign capped off a political association with Dukakis that had its beginnings in 1977.

"I was working my way through college as an auto mechanic, and mentioned my interest in politics to my boss," remembers Polechronis, who lives in Los Angeles near Century City. "He was a friend of Ed King, who planned to challenge Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis for reelection in 1978. He arranged for me to meet King, who promised me a job when his campaign began later that year."

It was a career move that must not have pleased his parents, whose family doctor was Governor Dukakis' father ("All the Greeks in the neighborhood went to Dr. Dukakis"), and whose neighbors included the sister of Kitty Dukakis, the State's First Lady.

"I came home one day, and Kitty Dukakis was there, waiting for her sister to come home. Dad announced that I was going to work for Ed King," said Polechronis.

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“Well, Kitty said ‘You can’t work for Ed King, he’s no good!’ She arranged an interview with the Dukakis campaign, and I was hired to do advance work for the princely sum of \$125 per week.”

King defeated Dukakis in 1978, and Polechronis finished his degree at Northeastern University in 1981. He went back to work for Dukakis during his rematch with King in 1982. Dukakis won back the statehouse, and invited Polechronis to join his administration as Director of Advance for the Governor’s Office.

The grueling pace—“18 hours a day, 6-7 days a week” convinced him to change direction, so in 1985, he went to work for the State Secretary of Transportation, Fred Salvucci. Salvucci had the collateral title of Chairman of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), and he assigned Polechronis to be deputy project manager of an 80 mile, 21 station commuter rail system being developed for Boston’s southern suburbs.

After seven months on the job, he was promoted to project manager, and his career in public transportation was well underway.

“It was an exciting time to be in transit,” says Polechronis. “In Boston, transit is the economic and social foundation of the region. The state government was very supportive of public transportation – Governor Dukakis even took the Green Line to work every day – and the community was very receptive to transit.

“Fred Salvucci had a very progressive view of the positive role government could play in developing infrastructure and promoting economic growth and social good. It’s a point of view that’s guided me throughout my career.”

Governor Dukakis was reelected in 1986, and the following year, announced his candidacy for president.

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Steve Polechronis was in charge of the announcement event.

"We planned the event for May 10 on Boston Common," he remembers. "The night before, it snowed four inches. On the morning of the event, I organized volunteers to shovel the entire Common clear of snow, and put down hay to soak up the mud. By the end of the day, I had mud up to my knees, but the event was a great success, and 10,000 people attended."

Polechronis wanted to resign from the governor's staff and work full-time for the campaign, but Dukakis refused to allow him, and most of his colleagues, to quit. "He was still governor, and he felt it wasn't right to take people away from their state duties."

Instead, Polechronis worked vacation days and weekends on mostly East Coast events through the primary season and the general election campaign. He remembers the campaign as both a very exciting time and a blur of events. In hindsight, he recognizes their shortcomings, and says, "Our campaign was a classic case of being unable to transition from the retail effort of a primary campaign to the wholesale requirements of a general election."

He admits to some empathy with the Dole campaign's present situation, closing in on the election and far behind in the polls.

"We would seesaw between reality and the absurd hope that everything would fall into place for us at the end. It was also liberating in a way, because near the end, with nothing to lose, Dukakis became more passionate on the stump, and our crowds responded in kind."

One of the most potent, and for Dukakis, most damaging images of the campaign was his ride in an army tank. "I didn't do the tank event," Polechronis is quick to say. But he does see an analogy between that incident and some of the problems experienced by the MTA.

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"People hone in on what makes an impression. Governor Dukakis was smart, decent and capable, but people remembered the tank ride.

"At MTA Construction, our only chance to make a positive impression is a project opening, which, because these are such long-term and complex projects, happen only every two to three years. The other lasting images are our mistakes.

"A 56,000 cubic foot concrete pour performed without interruption is a big deal, but it won't impress anyone unless they're in the business. We've topped out all three stations on Vermont Avenue flawlessly, but only an industry insider will notice. The steps we take to get to a line opening are hard, but unexciting. I don't suggest we should discount our mistakes, but they should be seen in the context of a technically challenging, time-consuming process."

After the 1988 campaign, Polechronis continued his project manager duties with MBTA, ultimately overseeing the development of \$2 ½ billion worth of commuter rail projects between 1985 and 1991.

"I learned there that for transit to be successful, it had to enjoy broad-based support," said Polechronis. "Extending service to the suburbs not only expanded ridership, it created a new network of supporters. It gave everyone a stake in the transit system. We need to do that here in Los Angeles, give everyone a stake in the success of transit, in order to make it work."

He came west to Los Angeles in 1991, after being recruited by Fluor Daniel to provide project management assistance and oversight for Metro Rail construction. His functions included oversight of quality control, safety, claims, and resident engineering. He reported directly to the MTA executive officer for construction, Stan Phernambucq, who in the fall of 1995, asked him to join the MTA and take over as project manager of Metro Red Line Segment 2.

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"The project was under siege. They had experienced subsidence on Hollywood Boulevard, the sinkhole, and the prime contractor had been fired.

"It was a hard choice, but I saw this as a challenge and a chance to make a real contribution to the city. This project will leave an imprint on Los Angeles every bit as significant as William Mulholland's aqueduct. Our freeways are built out – in fact, there's already too much asphalt.

"This rail system will help ensure the city's future vitality. It's our escape from gridlock. It will make a difference, and it will last as long as we operate and maintain it."

Since Polechronis took over Segment 2 one year ago, progress has moved forward. Replacement contractors were brought aboard to complete the subway tunnels and repair the sinkhole. That work is scheduled to be completed next spring.

Construction continues on subway stations along Vermont Avenue at Beverly, Santa Monica and Sunset Boulevards, and on Hollywood Boulevard at Western Avenue and at Vine Street. Segment 2 is scheduled to open by the end of December, 1998.

Difficult as managing a project with many inherited problems can be, Polechronis says he enjoys the work. "I have most of my weekends off, and have time to surf," he says with a smile.

Longboard surfing and horses – English style jumpers, are his hobbies. His wife, Jan Furutani, is a director of sales for the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Corporation.

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