

FHWA RETIREES NEWSLETTER

4TH EDITION

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Greetings!

FHWA retirees, our families and the Association have been on a rollercoaster since our last newsletter in March 2020. We hope

you are safe, healthy, and vaccinated so that you are all set when we schedule our next reunion at a date to be determined.

Report by Lyle Renz, Board Chair

We are looking forward to getting back together in an interesting area in keeping with our long tradition. Your Board has had one very successful Zoom meeting and another is planned.

We have a number of options for our next reunion, which will be held in 2022. In the past, planning and holding our reunions was a challenge to the organizers, but our predecessors on the Board anticipated problems. They built up a financial reserve for costs associated with problems if it were necessary to cancel a reunion. Lo and behold, we had to cancel two

but because of careful contracting we have had relatively minor losses and we still have ample reserves to move ahead and schedule for the future.

In the interim this issue is designed to provide an update about what is going on at FHWA, a legislative outlook for the highway program, a bio of the new Acting FHWA Administrator/Deputy FHWA Administrator, and an update on our very successful and continually improving website.

STAY SAFE!
Lyle Renz

New Acting FHWA Administrator

On Feb. 24, 2021 Stephanie Pollack was named Deputy Federal Highway Administrator and Acting Administrator. The press release on the announcement indicates she brings more than 30 years of executive experience in

transportation and transit, sustainability, environmental health and public policy strategy to FHWA. Most recently she served as Secretary and Chief Executive Officer of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation,

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where she was responsible for a fully multimodal state transportation department, oversaw the leadership of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority and served on the board of the Massachusetts Port Authority. She also held teaching positions at Northeastern University, the Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy and, for

two decades, worked for a private strategic planning firm and the Conservation Law Foundation.

She has a J.D. degree from Harvard Law School, a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering and a Bachelor of Science in Public Policy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

What's Been Happening at FHWA During Covid-19?

The most significant change is that for the past year almost all employees have been working from home. Hard to believe, but all communication is by phone, email, or teleconferencing. Office phone numbers are set so that calls are forwarded to the employee's residence.

In the Washington Office, Richard Weingroff reports that only he and one other are in a broad office area on any given day and most employees have not been in the office for about a year. He also reports that the process of walking around control correspondence to get review and signoff from many offices is a thing of the past and the copy to be sent is not printed until all electronic clearances have been obtained. The correspondence files

from first draft to final are all electronic.

The view among employees is that they will not return to their desks until everyone is vaccinated, which will not occur soon because there are many young employees who are at a low priority for getting the vaccine.

The employee profile is also changing. A report from the Office of Personnel shows that as of 2020 there were 2,700 employees agency wide, 38 percent of whom were female. There were 964 engineers of whom, 216 (22.4 percent), were female. While female employees were expanding "in the ranks and in management" there was an even more significant increase in the percent of political employees who were female.

New Website Helps FHWA Retirees Remain Connected

Report by Al Steger, Website Coordinator

In the last newsletter we introduced you to the new FHWA Retirees website. As you may recall, the website was created in response to suggestions received in the survey conducted after the last reunion in Schaumburg, IL in May, 2019. A website was the number one recommendation for improving communications among retirees.

So, how are we doing? Well, the virus has certainly put a dent in our activities this past year, and the same is true for website usage and traffic. It has not been all that we had hoped. Nevertheless, an examination of website activity has revealed some interesting statistics. In the eleven months since the website has been up and running, there have been about 2,200 visits, about half of which were unique visitors. As might be expected, there was a peak in usage immediately following each email blast that contained a link. But we have also had hits from other referring sites such as Google, Bing, and even the FHWA staff net.

With our diverse geographical membership, the traffic has come from all over the U.S. But we are also being noticed in other places. We have had hits from numerous foreign countries, including Chile

(presumably Greg Spier), Vietnam, Ireland, Austria, Finland, Israel, India, Canada, Belgium, Brazil, Lithuania, and Singapore. Whether these are FHWA retirees who are traveling (not likely in a pandemic year) or simply people just looking around, we don't know, but interesting nevertheless. We've even received one inquiry from a convention and visitors bureau offering to be the host city for a future reunion.

The Forum, a private sharing site for members only, was added to the website in hopes that it would become the place where FHWA retirees could share information or remembrances from days gone by-- sort of the FHWA retirees' version of Facebook. It could also be a great place to share birthday wishes or memories of members who have passed. Members have been slow to recognize the value of the site for those purposes, but we remain hopeful that it will at some point fill the void for keeping in touch between reunions. And remember, this and all past newsletters will always be available on the website.

We invite you to again take a look and share your thoughts about how we can make the website more valuable. <https://fhwa-retirees.org>

Retiree Leadership

The current board members are Lyle Renz, Chair; Dale Wilken, Past Chair; George Ostensen, who presides at business meetings; Phil Miller, Treasurer; Kevin Heanue,

Newsletter Editor; Joyce Curtis; Steve Moreno, and Rita Steinke. In addition, Al Steger is mailing and website coordinator.

Transportation Research Board Meeting – January 2021

Many BPR/FHWA employees have had the opportunity to attend annual sessions of the Transportation Research Board during their careers. In the 100-year history of the Board, this year was unique. The meeting was entirely virtual. Some interesting facts:

- Attendance was highest ever at about 20,000, 4000 higher than the previous high year.
 - Attendance was lower in most categories such as consultants and academics, who paid a reduced, but still significant rate.
 - Attendance by state DOT and federal agency employees soared. They signed up in greater numbers because they could benefit from the virtual sessions
- without paying registration fees or incurring travel costs because they are employed by TRB sponsoring agencies.
 - TRB was faced with \$ 2.5 million in cancellation fees from hotels, but after tough negotiations was able to get them all waived.
 - The 2021 meeting experience for TRB was technically positive, but not up to their standards.
 - Registration fees covered half the cost and TRB is left with a large deficit.
 - They are looking forward to 2022 to build on the “virtual” 2021 experience and provide an overall enhanced program with normal attendee arrangements

Improving FHWA Retiree Outreach

In future issues we hope to include short summaries of interesting or unusual things retirees are doing and photos. We welcome submissions and other suggestions. Let us hear from you.

To get started, we welcome your suggestions about how to share with

fellow retirees in future editions of this newsletter. Send an email to Kevin Heanue kheanue@comcast.net or Lyle Renz renzvl@comcast.net with items that might be included in the Newsletter or to Al Steger alan.steger@gmail.com for items to be posted on the website.

Legislation

In the last issue we stated that, “We hoped to provide an update on highway legislation, but once again there is no clear direction at this time.” And that “It looks like we will have to wait until after the November election for legislation impacting transportation. “

All that is behind us, and the current administration appears committed to a major legislative initiative and fiscal commitment under the heading of infrastructure. Also on a positive note, most Washington transportation-related interest groups believe that the appointment and confirmation of Pete Buttigieg as Secretary of Transportation is a plus. Since confirmation he is not letting any grass grow under his feet, but speaks positively of all the things the Department is doing and is exploring options for improvement. On a negative note he, in a dutiful way during his nomination hearing, parroted every administration’s going in mantra of no increase in the gas tax.

Looking forward, there is at this time, no clear path to a traditional highway and transit reauthorization. First there

will be discussion and debate over what constitutes infrastructure. In the process it will be determined whether highway and transit will be lumped into a broader program.

The Washington based “No Name” group was founded in 1988 in the run-up to ICETEA to monitor legislative developments at that time. Founders included Frank Turner and Lee Mertz. On a recent first-ever Zoom meeting of the group, people participated who were previously members, but now lived outside Washington and were rarely able to attend. During the discussion some expressed a concern that many in the incoming administration seemed to have a preference for transit over highways and had a favorable view of “enhancements.” As the discussion moved to the non-highway program direction, former Executive Directive Dean Carlson who was participating from Colorado forcefully commented, “You folks back in Washington remind people that the winter wheat from North Dakota travels by truck and they will not have their bread or beer unless it gets to their bakeries and breweries.”

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It has been extremely difficult to draft this section since the situation is changing so rapidly. As of this writing, mid-April, the picture for highways has significantly improved as specific mention is made of highway and bridge investment and

ways to cover the investment.

Stay tuned to national media, as your humble Retiree Newsletter is not equipped to keep pace with the dynamic changes occurring.

Retiree Humor

George Ostensen has presided at the reunion's annual business meeting for many years with interludes of retiree humor. In that the tradition the following retiree humor is offered.

- To all the grandparents who are missing their grandchildren, the parents say when this virus is over you can have them for a month.
- A trooper stopped a vehicle for speeding and asked the driver, is that alcohol I smell? The driver replied, "No officer, it is my hand sanitizer."

- Where there is a will, I want to be in it.
- Better 6 feet apart, than 6 feet deep.
- I used to be indecisive, but now I am not so sure.
- Without a single degree, the Romans built roads that have lasted 2,000 years. Then engineers entered the picture and we have potholes.
- People who confuse the words "burro" and "burrow" don't know their ass from a hole in the ground.

Out of the Attic

Rita Steinke, member of our board and unofficial historian of the organization, has contributed in so many ways to our success over the years. Most importantly, she has catalogued and made available photography from all our reunions.

Recently she provided a copy of a little-known publication dating from 1992, five years after our founding in Region 6, and four years before our

organization went national in 1996. The cover has the title "On the Road Again" and the first page indicates Volume One of "In the Good Old Days." The publication is a compilation of reminiscences of BPR trainees and their spouses while in the then three-year training program. Following Rita's suggestion, we will present in future issues edited excerpts from the publication. In the preface of the publication thanks are given to Judy

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Nemmers, Bari Morehead, and Virginia Renz for working on it.

When in the California Division, I recall one of the District secretaries talking to Les Lamm when he was making a tour through the office. She inquired if he would answer a question for her. He probably thought it would deal with his Executive Director position, however she asked if he had, in fact, nailed an outhouse door shut on the Project Engineer when he was a trainee! No record was kept of any response to the question.

Archie Bedford

Judy and I and our one-year old son left Long Beach, California to join the

BPR training program on a direct construction program assignment in Hayfork, California. We rented a small house/cabin that was heated with a wood stove and was wired with extension cords. Soon we decided we needed a washing machine and we drove 50 plus miles to Redding and went to Sears. We bought a washer and Sears asked for our address. Well, we didn't have one. We lived "over the swing bridge and past the pig farm" and that didn't seem to help. Judy then said that we lived across the street from Smitty, the game warden. Voila! That's all they needed because everyone knew where Smitty lived.

Charlie Nemmers

Please keep your contact information current

If you have moved and changed address or have a new email address or if you received this newsletter from a friend and want to get on the email list please let us know. Send an email to fhwaretires@gmail.com with the following information: name, spouse's name (if applicable), street address, telephone number and email address.

If you are so inclined send a copy of this newsletter to a fellow retiree who is not on our mailing list and suggest that they sign up.

To receive **FHWA News** or make a change in your contact information, please provide your name and street address to [Gregg Miller@dot.gov](mailto:Gregg.Miller@dot.gov)

**Hope to see you
soon and, as they
say in the song,
maybe next year!**

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