

Season 3 Episode 5 of the InfraTalk Podcast
Gloria Shepherd: Raising the Bar

Intro:

Hi, I'm Greg Nadeau, publisher of InfraTalk America. In this episode, my very special conversation with Gloria Shepard, a longtime colleague who made history as the first woman and the first African American appointed as the executive director of the Federal Highway Administration. This is the InfraTalk podcast.

Greg Nadeau:

Gloria Shepard, the executive director of the Federal Highway Administration. Welcome to InfraTalk America.

Gloria Shepherd:

Thank you, Greg. It's good to be here.

Greg Nadeau:

So pleased that you're able to do this. And I want to begin. One, reminding everybody or letting everyone know that's listening that we have a long history.

Gloria Shepherd:

Right.

Greg Nadeau:

So, in 1999, you became the director of the Office of Planning, and I was serving as the Deputy Commissioner of Policy Planning and Communications at Maine DOT.

Along the way, during those years, I think is when we first met. And then, of course, you went on to become the associate administrator for the Office of Planning Environment Realty. Going further back in your history. Born and raised in Albany.

Gloria Shepherd:

Correct.

Greg Nadeau:

That's your hometown. Attended the University at Albany SUNY and received a Doctor of Arts in humanistic studies?

Gloria Shepherd:

Correct.

Greg Nadeau:

Went on to earn a law degree from Albany Law School, your J.D. and then it wasn't enough for you. You had you went on to get your Master's of law from Georgetown University and continue to serve as a member of the New York bar. So, as we sort of touch on your academic history and then your professional history, what about your background, your education, your training sort of led you to first work for two state departments of transportation, New York State DOT and Maryland Highway Administration.

So, I don't know if I'd if a degree in humanistic studies is a, you know, perfect training for someone with a career in planning ahead of you. But tell us the story of how one led to another.

Gloria Shepherd:

Well, initially I worked in other departments in New York State, and I wanted to transfer to a department that was large, had money and could do things.

So, I ended up meeting the commissioner of DOT. At the time, name was Frank White, and I went to work for him. Not knowing the vastness of transportation, especially highway transportation and all the elements it covers. But as part of that experience, I became a special assistant for public transportation and then chief of staff for him. And then because the agency state, New York State, is such a large agency and has like 11 regions and had like \$5 billion worth of money, we got to do a lot there.

But after a while, some of my mentors told me, you know, you're at the high level in DOJ, you really need to go get your hands in the mud, get them dirty, and understand highway transportation, project development. I went to Maryland State Highway Administration, where I was the deputy director of planning and preliminary engineering, worked for Neil Paterson and Hal Kassoff.

And Neil really taught me a lot about not only the planning process but project delivery. And we worked on hands on a number of projects like the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and the Maryland 200, which is called the ICC and Redskin Stadium, and so on and so on. So, I really got an in-

depth understanding of projects and project delivery and what it takes to deliver them not only from an expertise perspective, but from a money perspective.

And that led me on to meet people and Federal Highway working with them on the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, which was the only federally funded highway owned bridge at the time, and they want to transfer it to the state. So, I was able to meet a lot of high-level officials and Federal Highway and eventually was able to come into the Federal Highway, as you say, and work my way up to direct the more you spent.

Greg Nadeau:

Your career has spanned 23 years at this point, almost.

Gloria Shepherd:

I can't believe it. But this year it's going to be 25-

Greg Nadeau:

25 years this year.

Gloria Shepherd:

Right, but who's counting?

Greg Nadeau:

But it's an extraordinary career. And also, I think it's important for us to note, especially on the occasion as we celebrate Black History Month, it's timely, really, to observe the history that your appointment has made.

You are the first woman to serve as executive director of the Federal Highway Administration and the first African American. Can you just reflect on that fact? It's not every day you get to make history and the opportunity, obviously, that it presents for you, but also the opportunity to pursue some priorities or passions of your own.

I know you've had a longstanding interest in providing inspiration to young people in the organization and workforce development. It's been a passion of yours for a long time, and as an executive at Federal Highway, you've been involved in a number of initiatives and programs over the years. But just generally speaking, the opportunity that this position has given you to sort of chase your own passions.

Obviously, we all understand that you became executive director a little over a year ago at the very same moment that the largest investment raised. The interest rate has been overturned and largely the responsibility of Federal Highway. So, as you've made history and began this pursuit, just some reflections on some of the opportunities it's provided for you and some of the things that you're excited to be working on.

Gloria Shepherd:

Well, it doesn't fall short on me that I am the first woman and the first African American to serve in this capacity. And it's a privilege to serve in such an organization as FHWA which is considered by almost every administration I've worked in. And as, and there's been five administrations, a well-oiled machine. That's what they call that based on well-oiled machine.

But firstly, as far as black history, I say this and I mean it. It doesn't fall short on me that a number of my relatives, my parents, my mother, father, they bent their backs low so I could stand up on them and reach these heights. My peers did not have the opportunity to be educated. They came from I don't know if I should say it, but a southern state, a real southern state that did not provide opportunities for African Americans in those ages.

My mother was actually a sharecropper. My father worked hard. And so, the one thing they wanted me to be sure is to get an education. And I remember my father saying, I want you to be educated because I want to be able to talk to people at the highest levels, but also the people who are sweeping the floor.

I make it a habit to say hello and talk to people at all levels, because really I'm just a person too. I mean, who's been blessed to achieve these heights, but as executive director, you're right. One of my absolute obligations is that I've climbed the ladder, but I can't pull it up behind me.

I have to climb the ladder and I'm going to extend it and bring other women and minorities along to have the opportunities that some other people had. And they didn't. So, to expose them to things like trainings and to initiatives like Every Day Counts, which is a broad initiative, working with all the states. So, giving them exposure to the audiences that they need to know about in order to achieve higher levels.

I say often I'm the first woman and the first black woman to occupy this position, but I won't be the last. I mean, that's not why I'm here. I'm here to ensure that others come along behind me. The organization is huge. And you're right. Bipartisan infrastructure law provided more money than we could ever imagine. And I don't know if the states could imagine it.

I mean, but it was a lot to be honest, and it was challenging, too, in many ways, because a large number of dollars were given to direct recipients in the discretionary programs. Now, when

you're talking about FHWA and our division offices, we have 52 divisions. They are well-oiled machines, and they know how to work with the states to deliver the program.

But working with direct recipients to get them in the process, that means through the financial management information system, we call it FEMAs and all the other requirements, takes a lot of work. So, we work with the states who have local project agreements to help their locals to adhere to the title, to the title 23 requirements that they just don't understand.

They had not a clue about when they're asking for money. So, to position our organization to be able to handle the magnitude of funding and responsibilities we have to hire a number of people. So, we're like 2800 people. And I think when you hear we're like 25, 2600, something like that. But we needed a significant increase to manage the large universe of funding and programs that BIL (Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) brought, including a lot of, you know, things we hadn't worked on in a long time, like climate change, like electric vehicles, and a lot of other things like reconnecting communities and, you know, things that we don't ordinarily work on.

We were mostly on highways and bridges and things like that in transit, but to change the thinking of the organization to promote these initiatives that were part of BIL was a long one. So I don't want to say it wasn't daunting, but it was a challenge. It was a challenge. And I don't do this job alone. I have, I work with tremendous colleagues, associate administrator and director of civil service.

The divisions and the highway federal lands. You know, people forget how that Highway Federal Lands is apart of FHWA. They had 736 people and they actually build the infrastructure. And so, I don't do this program. I could not be successful if it wasn't for not only the leadership but the great staff of this organization who are committed, who understand the mission of FHWA and committed to delivering it.

Greg Nadeau:

Let me connect this to when the Biden administration was elected, and Secretary Buttigieg was appointed. They had established what they call the Core Four and sort of administration priorities. And those included safety, equity, climate action and economic prosperity. And of course, the success of the bipartisan infrastructure law provided you, as you just described, with the resources to feed that talent that exists throughout federal highway and their state partners.

So, the resources provided you with an opportunity to really do some interesting things with respect to those core priorities. I remember when I served as administrator under Secretary Fox, the Ladders of Opportunity Initiative, something you and I worked on extensively, among others, really was the precursor to much of what you're doing now. You mentioned reconnecting communities. So that was really important and effective actually.

So, talk about that. How, the resources and maybe an example or two of what you've been particularly passionate about in terms of implementing those core priorities on behalf of the secretary?

Gloria Shepherd:

Well, you're right. The ladders of opportunity was the prelude to what we're doing now, and it really was the foundation. So, we had we understood that foundation.

And basically, like you said, a lot of the programs on the BIL, like I said, reconnecting communities, thriving communities, they are built off of ladders of opportunities with ladders. Because ladders of opportunities, basically looking where the low-income minorities live and unfortunately do not have the access to economic centers. And we had to in your time, what we did was work with the states and through GIS and try to show them where their low-income minority populations lived.

And they knew that. But what I don't think they knew is that there was a major transportation gap to get those communities to these jobs. And when you talk about economic competitors and economic vitality, you know that you have to get people to jobs. You've got to get them to work to earn money. So all those things carried over, I think, from the days when you were here.

And safety has always been our number one priority. Some people call it North star, and all our programs are built around safety. I always say, show me a project that does not have safety. And you don't have a project. Safety is critical. And one of the initiatives I continue to mission, reconnecting communities that's basic about providing infrastructure in a manner that communities can be joined again that were disrupted because of transportation.

And when you think about an example like caps, where the states put caps over bridges to combine two communities that were separated and the caps take them, that people can walk over the bridges to the other side of the community. Those are expensive, both are expensive but worthwhile. And I can't remember a time in history where somebody talked about reconnecting a community that was disturbed, and it wasn't disturbed by this administration or less.

It was disturbed because of the interstate era, I mean, interstates were divided, these communities. So, it's about finding ways to reconnect or rehabilitate or revise areas where people of the same culture were disrupted, and their churches might have been on one side and their social centers on another side. You might have split cemeteries and other things.

So, it's about bringing people back together who were separated because of highway infrastructure.

Greg Nadeau:

And the Core Four includes economic prosperity and the other byproduct, the other you know cause and effect of those investments is creating economic prosperity for entire communities and individuals, so it really is it's all about opportunity. And it's been impressive to see the extent to which you've been able to advance actual projects and investment in that regard.

And then, of course, climate action. This administration, I think, needs to be credited with taking climate change policy literally to the next level and beyond. And given the circumstances that we're all experiencing in all seasons, in all types of weather, and it's warmer than it used to be, or it's colder than it used to be. I think the general public and extensively the business community has really approached, has really begun to understand and appreciate why these strategies and investments with regard to climate change is so important, and obviously such a predominant issue throughout the transportation community.

And so, something you've been engaged in and involved in for a very long time. So just some reflections on climate change and the opportunities that current resources and policies have afforded federal highway.

Gloria Shepherd:

Well, climate change, you're right, is a major initiative and probably more so in this administration than I've seen the previous administration, because it funded so many so many programs both to the states and to direct recipients like carbon reduction programs, like community funding and infrastructure programs that combine both corridor and community.

So one is looking at the larger picture and one is looking at communities and how you establish infrastructure like including the charging stations into the infrastructure where people live and the public have access to and also the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, establish a joint program office, which is what DOE and DOT to work on electric vehicles to reach the presidential president's goal of establishing electric vehicles and to reduce carbonization and even to provide tax incentives for lower income people to purchase EVs.

Because historically, and it's not that historic because it's not all that new, but I mean old, I should say. But, you know, EV cars are not usually that inexpensive, but the tax credits and the initiatives that this initiative this administration has provided makes it more attractive to people to buy electric vehicles and by improving the infrastructure and, you know, establishing fast charge not only in the an interest in the corridors, but also in the communities.

So, it takes less time to fuel cars because nobody obviously wants to buy an electric vehicle. If you have to take two or 3 hours to fuel it and you can have a gas car, you've got to fill it in 20 minutes. So, providing the infrastructure in places where people can actually access it has been

important. Also, the administration and I can't remember I'm sorry, the acronym for it, but it's called **Protect, and** it provides money for things like looking at sea level rises, looking at areas, and the different impacts of climate change happen.

Allowing states to take a comprehensive look. Providing funding for them to look at, to provide strategies for them to implement when these events occur. Because a lot of events that were projected to be 50 years and longer are now ten years and shorter. So, the frequency and the ferocity of these events are larger than ever, more significant than ever.

So, it provides the funding for not only the coastal states but also to the interior states to look at their infrastructure, to see how it's being impacted by climate change and allows them an opportunity to address those by using different types of ingredients and pavements and all of those other things. So, the administration has funded well, they had a lot of climate change initiatives.

Greg Nadeau:

We began to get a clue when we were having 100-year storm events every year.

Gloria: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I mean, I hate to say it, but look at California alone. I mean, every other day, it's something it's like lots of rain. It's like their infrastructure is being washed out, like mudslides. And, you know, and I imagine in about three or four months from now, it'll be on fire and the same infrastructure will be damaged and we'll be doing the same thing over and over again.

Greg Nadeau:

So, everyone's work on climate change cannot intensify too soon.

Gloria Shepherd:

That's right. Absolutely

Greg Nadeau:

They're clearly important to the country and the world. I want to it's one thing that always amazes me about these conversations is how quickly they go by. So, I really want to make sure I talk about something near and dear to both our hearts. And that's Every Day Counts.

And I'm going to combine it with digital project delivery technology, something that InfraTalk America on our platform, is very important. We call it one of our targeted technology sectors because we want to work on things that are impactful and there are very few things more

impactful than the digital project in the project delivery realm. Then technology and there's a widespread movement to advance and accelerate the use of these technologies across the board.

And I also go back first. Every Day counts. You are a founding associate administrator, I like to call it along with your colleagues, **Kenji**, who at the time ran the Office of Infrastructure, and Amy Lucero, who ran the resource center and the research center's been such an important contributor to really managing the initiatives over the years. And I go back to those days and when Victor Mendez served as administrator and I came in as his deputy in 2009, we spent the first year really looking for and working with our leadership team to find a way to really build up a mechanism, a tool to advance and accelerate the use of technology.

And it really was an advantage to us because Administrator Mendez really made it his top priority and spoke of it often, which really gave us the opportunity to organize the Federal Highway to become a real leader. And of course, the process of partnering with the states, which meant everything, all of that went well. So as a founding member of Everyday Counts and the initiative I was going to refer to actually in EDC-1, we had had an element of the 11, I think, initiatives that year.

And there, by the way, have been 73 initiatives, all told to date, over the years, a significant number of initiatives addressing a wide array, but a lot of it had to do with project delivery. Certainly, in the early years. And you put together a package, I think we called it the project Delivery Toolkit, and you had assembled several initiatives, including programmatic agreements, which had been one of those things I evangelized about because I found them to be so logical and fascinating.

We won't get into it to a great extent today, but they were laws that were on the books. They didn't require any new laws or any new regulations. And that's one of the things Victor and I from day one, concluded that Every Day Counts needed to rely on volunteer participation with the states and identify initiatives that didn't require they were essentially underutilized but proven and tested innovations.

So reflecting back on EDC and you're having been involved every day since at a high level, you know your reflections on Every Day Counts, why it has succeeded through three administrations now and continues to go strong.

Gloria Shepherd:

Well, I want to give credit to Victor for authoring the idea, but you developed it. I mean, you were one who lifted it and actually framed it.

So, there were 11 initiatives at probably sessions throughout the country, by the way, which you made Kenji and I occasionally go to each one of them. We split them. But, you know, Every Day Counts is just a commonsense approach to doing business. And the reason why it's stood the test of time across many administrations is because it has shown, as demonstrated, actual benefits in the transportation world.

So much so it was codified in law. I've never seen a program that we've done in all my years that was actually codified in law and we are up to EDC six or seven at this point. I mean, and you were here for EDC one. And so, look at all the years that we've kept it going and we haven't kept it up by ourselves, the state.

I mean, typically what we do is get together with the states and we propose initiatives that we think will advance the state of the practice to the state of the art and transportation. So, it's not a FHWA handing down initiatives, or the state come in and asking us, it's us working together to promote different initiatives under Every Day Counts.

And you use the programmatic agreement. I don't know if you know that we still have programmatic agreements with six or seven federal permitting agency, including the Corps and National Marine Fisheries, and Coast Guard, EPA. We spend \$1.5 million per year on programmatic agreement, does a couple of things. It provides liaisons in those agencies. So, when our projects get stuck and we need a permit from one of those agencies, it allows us to call on them to give preferential treatment to the projects throughout the country that are stuck.

The other part of it is some states like Georgia, and I give Russell all the credit world, he actually not only provides funding, he provides a location for the liaisons to work and all his projects go through the process almost seamlessly. So, it was a focused approach that had not been realized in the past, even thought of in the past, that Every Day Counts brought to light and made it possible for the states to see benefits on supporting programmatic agreement.

One of the agreements that we have with Fish and Wildlife Services is something called with the long ear bat. And so, there were like I think it might be 37 states now that have different programs agreement from the Midwest. Even in the South, they asked for and they called and asked for them. And you know why? Because when they had those programmatic agreements and they run into a species while they're working with their projects, they can get through the process very easy to get their permits because they have a program.

Greg Nadeau:

And one state agency, whether it's Federal Highway or Fish and Wildlife or EPA, once they've entered into a process of negotiating a programmatic agreement, say, on a bridge replacement. But that programmatic agreement then becomes the standard. So, all future bridge replacements, you've got the agreement in place. It expedites the process geometrically.

Gloria Shepherd:

Absolutely. Exactly.

Greg Nadeau:

It's always been a great example for me as to how agencies and regulators can really work with those who are regulated and come up with processes that don't reduce the requirements in any way, shape or form.

They simply establish a process that speeds up the meeting. Those requirements. Obviously, the beneficiary is the public and the environment.

Gloria Shepherd:

Exactly. And you know, other things like you promoted Design Build and CMGC construction general manager contractors, which accelerated the process for the states to get their projects through design and into construction seamlessly

Greg Nadeau:

And CMGC say, which is basically in a nutshell, you're bringing the contractor in into the process earlier with the designers and you know, they can address things like construct ability.

So, it just, it absolutely speeds things up. And when we launched the initiative in, in the first round of Every Day Counts, Utah was the only state in the country utilizing it. So today, well, well over half the states have to authorize the use of that.

Gloria Shepherd:

And some states that had a limit on the number of projects that could be done on those arrangements and going to the legislatures and got them to increase the number of projects that can be done because they've seen the benefits of saving time through these mechanisms.

So, I mean, that was that's a that's an initiative that, like I said, has stood the test of time. And it's just been just a totally successful.

Greg Nadeau:

Well, thank you for all the work you've done over the years on EDC. And just, so you know, what I like to tell folks is Victor Mendez was I consider the father of EDC.

I was his humble architect. You know, mutually a team effort. And we so relied on the leadership of federal highway and spent a lot of time with the associate administrators early on really trying to figure out how was the best approach to this. And so the buy in we got from the entire organization. And then it became something that I think the divisions that's really enjoyed across the country really got engaged in projects with their partners at the state DOTs and probably part of the part of the secrets are not behind it.

It's the length of time it is continue to contribute.

Gloria Shepherd:

Absolutely.

Greg Nadeau:

And you know, I talked about E-ticketing and EDC six and that is because we do so much work on digital project delivery. I looked at that 43 states, a record for EDC, adopted that initiative.

Gloria Shepherd:

Wow.

Greg Nadeau:

And the result of that, you know, a couple of years later is most states have secured the technology they need to accept the data from various sources throughout the materials sector.

Gloria Shepherd:

Right.

Greg Nadeau:

It has catalyzed the transition to digitized construction materials, transport apparatus that has- it's going to become a very critical element to streamlining projects. But more importantly, the data that was once lost is now digitized and collected and really contributing significantly to what we call next generation in construction. Pace of change and the digital side has been nothing short of extraordinary and it's going to continue.

So that means significant savings in money and time for projects as we go forward. And when you're looking at billions of dollars for federal, state and local funds going into these projects, the

savings could be astronomical. So, congratulations to Federal Highway and the leadership that it has provided in so many in so many respects.

Gloria Shepherd:

We have to thank you too. You were in here and saw what we do, and by the time you left, you saw what we could do.

And now with your new adventure, you know, you're helping us advance the places that we where we had deficiencies in. And I agree with you 100% working with the state, so much is going to be this and that need that digital and that because they can save money and time and time is money and money is time.

I mean so the work you guys have done on the outside knowing us from the inside is priceless.

Greg Nadeau:

It's been, as I've observed, the public private partnerships between states and digital providers, whether it's software companies or other contractors. It has been really amazing to watch to observe that the collaboration that has taken place and given the pace of change in technology and software development, it's essential for these partnerships to exist with the private sector because public sector agencies couldn't possibly keep up.

So, that collaboration is making the utility of these technologies happen much more quickly. So thank you for that. It's been a, it's been a really remarkable ride just watching what happened, you know, after my entire adult life in public service for ears. And administering the Federal Aid Highway program, to see it from the private sector side really just paints a picture.

Gloria Shepherd:

It really does, exactly. One of my four or five priorities I brought when I became executive director and I was talking to the agency, is innovation and technology, because we know that that's the way of the world, that's the future. And so, we have to get- become more proactive in that area than we have before. I mean, I think all too often we sat back and let industry come up with ideas, the university, come up with the ideas.

But the application has to be with us and the state. So I mean, that's the that's the nice marriage that comes from working with private sector and the universities and bringing us the information and working with the state, because you have to have that complete, you know, connectivity between the actual technology and the implementation.

Greg Nadeau:

The problem with these conversations, I hate to stop them, but we that's at some point we have to we have no choice because you've got an agency to run.

But I do want to say it's been I think you're the 11th. Is that correct? Well, 11 executive director and the history of federal highway, with I think with your length of experience and particularly in planning environment and reality realm, you really brought, I think, bring to the job a unique set of experiences and background and history with the agency.

So, you're certainly among the best-prepared individuals to assume these responsibilities and probably are at a particularly important time, giving them the extraordinary demands on federal highway right now and administering the bipartisan infrastructure law at which I have to say as an outside observer these days, federal highway has done an extraordinarily good job. I know you're not, I know there's some complaining about the pace of putting out NOFOs.

And I've been among those when it was the particular NOFO I was interested in. But I've given credit to Administrator Bhatt for six months after he was on the job, he put out a NOFO on the ADC Mess Grant.

Gloria Shepherd:

Absolutely.

Greg Nadeau:

So, we were pretty excited about that. But I know the demands were extraordinary and there are still many discretionary grant programs to go.

But Federal Highway has handled it very effectively.

Gloria Shepherd:

Well, yeah, I agree. And Shailen brings that state background to, so now that he's in highways, he can, I can see the importance of the state and the need to be responsive because the states don't want to send something in or talk to us and it just goes into a black hole.

And so being responsive is not only getting the NOFOs out, but it's getting the project agreement and then getting the obligation out as quickly as possible. Because like people say, you're not going to go to a ribbon cutting on a project agreement. You know, those highway construction or something. It has to be generated. Yeah. Thank you Greg.

Greg Nadeau:

Congratulations. And that's an extraordinary challenge ahead of you. And you've got a year a little bit under your belt already. But thank you for your service. Thank you for your years of service and the great work you're doing now.

Gloria Shepherd:

And thank you, Greg. Take care.

Greg Nadeau:

Thanks again Gloria.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Infra Talk Podcast. We hope this discussion inspires you to ask your own questions and encourages you to have discussions with policymakers and your peers.

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