**Future of Infrastructure with Jeremy Goldberg**

**Episode 4**

**Jeremy Goldberg (Host)**

**Seleta Reynolds (guest)**

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the *Future of Infrastructure*, a part of Microsoft’s Public Sector Future series. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft. And I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world by talking with public servants, philanthropists, artists and place-makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future while putting people first.

Today, my guest, Selena Reynolds, GM at the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, joins me to talk about work she’s done in LA around gender equality and transportation. Selena, welcome to the future of infrastructure.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Thanks, Jeremy. Thanks for having me.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Wonderful, so for those who are no familiar with Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, please tell us a little bit about your agency, and of course, introduce yourself and your role.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Sure. So, Los Angeles the first thing that pops into most people’s minds, when you say the words, Los Angeles maybe you think about celebrity, maybe you think about the Kardashians or palm trees or the beach.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Super Bowl champions.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Super Bowl champs the 28 Olympic games, but also traffic, Los Angeles has earned its global reputation as the car capital of the world, because it’s a city that was built really to serve the vision of American independence and freedom. That was symbolized by the arrival of the automobile. And by the way that the Eisenhower administration built out the National Highway System in the ‘50s and ‘60s, sort of a child or a grandchild of the New Deal, that this was part of the Public Works investment of that generation.

And so, LADOT really sits in this extremely unique position in a region that also has a reputation as being ungovernable because of the sort of fractious nature of it. You know, when people think of California, they think of it as being a very – sort of a bastion of coastal elite politics, progressive democratic politics, but the truth about Southern California is that it has a real libertarian streak. And most of this part of the state the thinking was, look, if we can just give people their water and their power, we’re just going to let them do what they want, because we have unlimited land.

So, LADOT’s job is to try and – and step into the midst of this in the middle of a – in a period where we have really different expectations for transportation. So, we have a huge, massive roadway network, 7,500 miles of streets and alleys that we manage and operate, 5,000 interconnected intersections. We have one of the largest and most sophisticated traffic management centers in the world, ATSAC. It was built for the ‘84 games, and it remains one of the seven wonders of the transportation nerd world, ATSAC does.

We also have 37,000 parking meters, and we also run a transit agency. We – we move about 20 million trips a year. We’re not Metro, though. Metro is a county transportation authority. They move more like 400 million trips a year, on subways and busses, and our job is to help enable that, and to help them engage in the build-out of this huge subway system, the restoration of subway service in LA, which is a big undertaking, a big job.

My own background is that I grew up in the rural South. I grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, and went to college on the East Coast, and then moved out to the West Coast after school, landed in the first job that would take me, which was as a bike parking intern for the City of Oakland in the Public Works Agency, and kind of fell in love with transportation and infrastructure, even though I really had no business doing it, no background in it.

I was a history major, studying Modern American History in school. I’m a football fan, and you know when – on college game day, when the athletes, or on NFL game day, when the athletes talk about where they went to college, and some of them say "school of life," that’s how I feel about my education in transportation, is that I really learned by doing.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I love it. I love it. I mean, what I really appreciate already, and I’m sure, like our audience will as well, is that you started with the history and the context setting, right thinking about what people believe they know about Los Angeles, and that’s media, entertainment, Hollywood, right, things that you think of the glitz and the glamor. And you also talk about, like bringing this into the City Operations, right and the elements of what it takes to kind of move people around from place to place, with such a geographically large and vast kind of area, as well as very rich in diversity and history.

And so that point that you mentioned about kind of what kind of drives or motivates you, in terms of how you entered into public service, you talked a little bit about your experience in Oakland. You know, is there a particular moment, right, that demonstrated and like stands out to you, that kind of compelled you to, like say, "You know what? I have a desire to improve things. And you know what? I want to do this on the biggest stage in Los Angeles," what motivated your choice to kind of – to pursue this profession and this career?

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Really, it was the first time I spray-painted a little dot on the sidewalk in Oakland and came back – because I was the bike parking intern, and somebody had put in – our contractor put in a bike rack, and there was a bike parked at it. You know, I was hooked. It is such an immediate – it gives such immediate feedback about the meaning that your work has in the world. And for me I’ve always been somebody who really likes to question and poke hard at the status quo, and so this is we’re talking 1999 – 2000. I’m going out, door to door, and asking people whether or not I can put a bike rack in front of their business, and then it graduated into, now I’m going to ask them if I can put a bike lane on the street, and then it graduated into, now I’m going to ask them if I can get rid of the parking or get rid of the travel lane to put in a bus-only lane, or to put in a bike lane.

There was something about the fact that we were changing the conversation about who the street is for and what the street is for, and something magic about the power of moving – of geometry, moving those white lines and yellow lines around, to change behavior, to change the way that people think about their streets as truly public spaces, was really intoxicating to me.

And as a history major the study of history is about we can all look at the same event, and we’re going to have a robust debate about what it means and where it fits, and you know, we’re going to talk about the people’s history, and we’re going to talk about the people’s history, and we’re going to talk about the canon, and we’re going to talk about all of those things and how you tell a story, and a street is that same thing. We’re going to look at the same 80 feet of asphalt, and we’re going to each bring to it our different stories. And it, to me, felt like there was an opportunity because I did not – was not an engineer. I was not a planner. I didn’t have any of the baggage that came with those traditional sort of arenas of instruction.

I’ve always found a lane for myself, pun intended. There’s always – the transportation puns just flow.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I like it, I like it. I love that you walked us through those different parts of this journey and the motivating forces behind it, starting with like painting dots, right, on the sidewalks, and going into that discussion about reaching out and having those discussions with people, related to their block, related to the street.

And to me, and that’s where a lot of this, right, becomes the most important, because you’ve taken those discussions, and you’re applying them, right, to the problems that you want to solve because you’re hearing directly from the residents. And so one of the areas that you’ve shared with me before today’s conversation, that I would love to go deeper into, related to that, is around this Changing Lanes study that you and the LADOT undertook, and the findings that are particularly interesting around gender equity in transportation.

So, if you could kind of talk through this project a bit, and why it’s important for the city today, and the things that you’re aspiring to do, going forward.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Just a little history. It’s important to understand that there are twin biases at play in the way that our transportation looks right now, and particularly the way our transit system and service functions. The transit service we have in the United States serves predominantly white-collar/9-to-5 trips. It moves. You can look at many different examples, the DC Metro, BARTA in Atlanta, BART in the Bay Area. These systems are designed to move people from suburbs to employment centers, in the morning, and take them home in the evenings, and that is the way it is, for two reasons.

One is, transit funding in this country, the formula – literally, the formula is that – bureaucrats use to award projects, award projects that can reduce peak congestion, either because of – for air quality reasons, or for other reasons, and peak congestion occurs from 7 to 9 and 4 to 6, or it used to, right?

So, there’s powerful forces that sort of move us in the direction of concentrating transit service in those two buckets, and the reason why people are coming from suburbs to employment centers has to do with red-lining, it has to do with house – federal housing policies, right? All these things are connected, but transportation is there to pick up the pieces and try and fix this weird other stuff that’s going on in the background.

The other bias that’s at play, when it comes to the way that our system functions is that – transportation field is predominantly male and men have traditionally sort of served that role of going to work at 9 in the morning and coming home by 5:00 in the evening, and these are the people who are planning the system, and all of the data that they’re getting back about when people are driving, when the congestion happens, and how both state and federal regulators are going to fund and measure their system performance, is that that’s what they need to deal with. They need to address these two sort of peaks of congestion.

The problem with all of that is that that approach leaves out vast majorities, not just of people, but of trips. You know, as it turns out, most of the trips that any of us make in a given day, even if we have 9-to-5 office jobs, are – are not commute trips. There’s a whole bunch of other trips that we make during our day, and that is even more true for women. Women do a lot more of what’s called trip-chaining than men do. They’ve got to drop the kids off at school, they’ve got to go to work, they’ve got to go pick up the dry cleaning, they’ve got to pick up a prescription for their parents, they’ve got to – you know, get the kid to the afterschool activity, and then they’ve got to get back home again.

And I’m embarrassed to say, it had never occurred to me that I needed to think about that specifically. You know, obviously, I’ve been a woman, I’ve lived in a lot of different places, a woman with small kids, a woman traveling with my elders, a woman with and without a car, but it had never occurred to me to sort of think about how we might study that more broadly and understand that problem.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s, this is great. I want to make sure that, like our audience also will have access to – we’ll provide a link to the Changing Lanes study so that they can read it and get insight into a lot of – I mean, great set of recommendations, as well, in this report. You know, one of the things that I’m hearing quite a bit about, and you’ve touched on this, right, so from the data and the insights, this trip chaining piece that you talk about. You touched on access and people living with disabilities. I think some places that are managing major transit systems, or for that matter transit agencies, are trying to solve – or trying to define, rather, what inclusive infrastructure is, what it means.

And I think that, you know, any reaction to that, I mean, any – any thoughts or advice in terms of how you would advise others in similar roles to kind of help them define that?

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Well, there’s a big, big risk there, which is inherent in the work that you do if you lead a big organization, or even if you have the privilege to be inside a transit agency or something like that, and the risk is to sort of – you know, think to yourself, well, what does inclusive infrastructure mean? And then to – to figure out, to sort of maybe read some articles about it, or do a little research about it, and then to make some recommendations, but – but what we found with the Changing Lanes work is, first of all, there is an almost complete and total absence of research in this arena.

There is some research about women – how women feel when they are actually on public transit. You know, spoiler alert, they feel really unsafe, but there is not a lot of research about something much harder to pin down, which is, how do the transportation options that women and girls have available to them shape their daily lives, and even more important, how does it shape – what trips are they not taking because the transportation system fails them?

And the only way to get the answer to that question is to do community-based research, to really go and fund people to come and participate in conversations and to share their lived experience. And so my first piece of advice to anybody in a transit or transportation agency is, number one, take a look at the data you already have and disaggregate it by gender, because you will see a different story will begin to emerge.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Now, with these recommendations, and with these sets of – this process in place, like there have got to be operational challenges, right, to implementing some of these solutions, so, talk with us a bit about some of those, the implementation side of, like the challenges you face, and how to overcome them.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Yeah, I mean, I always ask myself, where does my power lie? You know, when I’m trying to confront any problem, and what are the things I can influence in those fears? I mean, I’m an investor. I invest in the transportation system. I’m a manager of the transportation system, and I’m a regulator, I enforce the rules that the city council says. And I have a pretty clearly defined authority within each of those things, and then I have some places where I can play at the margins, and that’s where I found the money for this project, right?

This project happened because people are so burnt out, fragile and overwhelmed at this point, but it’s also a huge moment for us to think about where are we spending our time and how could we spend it differently, and what are the things that will only happen because you, Jeremy, are in the position you have, or I’m in the position that I have, and let’s make sure that we make time and space for those.

So, the study came to be because of that, and what we learned from it were that there were a lot of low-tech things that we could do for women and girls, right away, that had nothing to do with technology, and because as I described early – earlier, a lot of the forces that led us to this moment, where women are really disenfranchised because of the transportation system’s failures, those are systemic reasons and they require systemic responses, and systemic responses are only possible if you have – have an organized coalition of folks who have focused asks for what they want.

So some of the stories that came out of the study were pretty heartbreaking women who – you know, because bus service is not reliable, they can’t get to church to worship in fellowship with their community. Because there is no bus service that takes them to – or any service that takes them to recreational areas, park, nature, the beaches, they never go there. Because it takes them two transfers and two hours to get out to some part of the county, to visit their families that live there, they only do it once a year, even though maybe they live 20 miles away.

So, these are the things that give your life meaning, that contribute to our mental wellbeing, and when half of the population is not in a place where they can tend to their own mental wellbeing, and they’re the ones that we are requiring to tend to the wellbeing of families and neighborhoods and cities, then – you know, we owe a debt, right, and so the early things that came out of that were simple ones. You know, women were saying, "Listen, I have already been on two busses to get to the grocery store. I’m coming home. I’ve got my arms full of groceries. It’s dark outside. I’ve got my two young kids with me. Can’t I just get the bus to stop where I need it to stop and not have to walk an extra five blocks?"

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I do have one final question, and you’re – you’re well-read and studied, I mean, clearly, you’ve been working on these issues for some time, and people are reading what you’re writing and what you’re sharing. You know, what is one thing that you’ve read, or you’ve watched or listened to lately, that had an impact on the way that you’re thinking about this moment in technology, in infrastructure, in COVID recovery? I don’t know if it’s something that you watched on the Kardashians, it might not be.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Listen, there are a lot of life lessons there. You know, I will say, one article that’s been making the rounds that is front of mind for me, right now, is an article that was written by Reshma Saujani, who is the founder of Girls Who Code, and she put up this article in *TIME* called "No One Wants to Go Back to the Office as Much as White Men," and, obviously, I lead a big agency, and I sit inside a very traditional old-school bureaucracy. And I believe in government. I believe in the power of systems. I’m comfortable working inside big institutional contexts to try and like disrupt them and move them forward, and you know, I’m an organizational management geek, and I love talking about culture change inside a bureaucracy like LADOT, but one of the places where I have felt very much like an outlier is in this discussion of returning to work.

And I think this really hits on a whole bunch of things that we’ve talked about. How do we think differently about work? How do we think differently about, and specifically for me, transportation and work? And how do we take a more inclusive approach?

So you know, I was so heartened to see this article. And I’m in the middle of our third employee survey on how working from home has gone for LADOT, and trying to lift that up, and also make the transportation argument that it is better for everyone if we do not go back to the way that it was before.

So, that’s the thing that’s top of mind for me, but there’s a generational clash too, around sort of hanging on to an old way of doing things. And every time we have another surge, every time there is another moment where we’re talking about shutting things down again, or wearing masks, I just think to myself, the virus is not going to be done with us until we’ve learned whatever lessons we needed to learn. And we’re not, we’re not there yet.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thank you so much for sharing your story, these examples, so many takeaways about Changing Lanes. And we want to make sure that we drop some of these articles that you shared in our podcasts and our website for our audience, which I know they’ll get a lot of takeaways and a lot of additional good insight from, and of course, thanks to all the listeners, the audience. Until next time this is The Future of Infrastructure. Thank you, Seleta.

**SELETA REYNOLDS:** Thanks Jeremy.

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**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode and being a part of the Future of Infrastructure, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities. If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate and review the show. To learn more, visit us at **wwps.microsoft.com**, or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter at **JeremyMGoldberg**.

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