

Q&A

Jennifer Aument Transurban



Jennifer Aument is president, North America, of ARTBA member firm Transurban, an international toll road investor and operator managing the development, delivery and operations of successful transportation public-private partnerships (P3s). Aument also is president of ARTBA's P3 Division, which hosts its annual conference July 17-19 in Washington, D.C.

TB: What do you see as some of the latest trends or challenges in transportation P3s?

AUMENT: We have seen real momentum in the U.S. P3 market over the last decade, with more than \$145 billion in transportation infrastructure projects moving forward and an increasing number of state and local leaders embracing partnerships with the private sector. ARTBA members have been instrumental in helping achieve this progress, but there are dynamics underway in the market that could hinder future progress.

Over time, we have seen project sponsors and their advisors shift greater risk to the private sector, which can unnecessarily increase project costs or reduce scope. Successful and sustainable P3s take a more balanced approach, with specific risks assigned to the partner best positioned to manage them. For example, governments protect taxpayers when they shift traffic risk on toll roads to a private partner with the expertise and technology required to predict trends over decades. In contrast, public sector professionals often have far better experience and leverage than their private counterparts in securing certain regulatory or environmental approvals. Shifting these kinds of risks to the private sector can work against the interest of taxpayers by unnecessarily increasing costs, delays improvements or reducing scope.

Also of concern, a few recent high-profile P3 projects have faced challenges during the permitting and construction phases, resulting in claims and delays. While studies in mature P3 markets such as the U.K. and Australia consistently find that P3 projects are delivered on time and on budget at rates higher than traditional projects, it is inevitable that some large, complex projects will face unique obstacles – no matter what delivery method is used. It is critical that ARTBA and its members continue to educate government decision-makers on the growing list of successful P3s to ensure project-specific issues do not reflect poorly on a now proven and successful model.

TB: As an established woman leader in transportation construction and the P3 sector, what are some of the remaining challenges—and opportunities—that you see for women?

AUMENT: Women hold only 13 percent of transportation jobs. With half of our colleagues expected to retire over the next decade, the industry cannot continue to leave great talent sitting on the sidelines.

At Transurban, women are 43 percent of the global workforce and nearly half of top executives. We embrace training and education; ensure diverse recruitment pools from which hiring managers select the best candidate; conduct regular reviews to ensure equal pay; and track and report results in this area just as we do other key performance metrics like safety and revenue.

These kinds of practices help link companies to talent and create opportunities for women. It is equally important to promote cultures and tools that help women achieve long-term success. I know from personal experience that it takes extra energy to be the only woman in the room – managing complex issues, while also dealing with micro-aggressions that many of us still experience daily. Until the transportation workforce is in greater balance, it is important that managers are conscious of this potential dynamic, educate all team members on the impacts of often-subconscious bias, and provide female colleagues with resiliency skills to ensure they do not burn out.

TB: What are your thoughts on transportation construction recruitment and retention challenges in general, regardless of gender, including labor at the project site, and in engineering, design, and management positions?

AUMENT: This is the challenge that most keeps me up at night. ARTBA does a great job of advocating on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures for new and sustainable funding to build and modernize American infrastructure. My fear is that when we finally solve the funding crisis, we will discover the real crisis is that we have no one there to do the building.

Modern transportation projects require greater technology, commercial and financial skills than bridges and highways of the past. We continue to fall short in attracting women and minorities. All of us in the industry have an obligation to educate young people on the exciting opportunities awaiting

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them in transportation; support training, scholarship and mentoring programs; and help break down barriers to entry for minority and female professionals.

There are great programs underway that are making a difference, including ARTBA's work with the Transportation Development Foundation to upskill and mentor. At Transurban, we are tackling this issue through internship programs targeting underrepresented minorities and our Females Excelling in Engineering Technology (FEET) initiative.

TB: How have you been able to collaborate with the industry in the local areas where you have projects?

AUMENT: Local talent and expertise are among the most critical elements of any successful transportation project, especially large and complex P3 projects. With decades of experience in the market, local partners are often best positioned to understand and deliver on the needs of our client, customers and communities.

In Virginia, for example, Transurban and our partners have put hundreds of local contractors to work to design, build and operate our Express Lanes network. We have generated more than \$850 million in contract opportunities for small, women and minority-owned businesses – the majority of which are local.

At ARTBA, we have a role to help foster new relationships and encourage government decision makers to maximize opportunities. As a concessionaire, Transurban is committed to creating more opportunities for local industry and pleased join our local partners in sharing best practices as other new P3 markets emerge across the country.

TB: We've read that Transurban has helped save commuters an average of 64 minutes on the 95 Express Lanes and 26 minutes on the 495 Express Lanes projects in metro Washington, reducing congestion and providing more travel options. What were some keys to this success; some lessons learned that you can share with others?

AUMENT: The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and its leaders have been the key factor in the success of the Express Lanes network. VDOT has put in place a smart and modern mix of traditional revenue sources and delivery models, tolling and public-private partnerships to meet their transportation needs. The agency is courageous enough to try new and innovative solutions. It has dedicated professionals who are highly skilled at removing obstacles to ensure these solutions can be delivered. Transurban and VDOT share a commitment to customers, which is another reason the Express Lanes network has been a success.

TB: What other projects are you and Transurban excited about?

AUMENT: We remain optimistic about the U.S. market



Jennifer Aument, right, with Sallye Perrin, senior vice president at WSP.

and look forward to growing our business here. I think the most exciting, long-term opportunity in the U.S. lies within the existing public toll road market. There are opportunities across the country where governments could put new P3s in place on existing toll roads that would result in substantially lower tolls, reduced congestion, and improved travel for customers. These partnerships could also accelerate and guarantee future revenue to deliver billions of dollars for the construction of new infrastructure. Transurban estimates that the top 10 U.S. toll road networks alone could generate \$180 billion in funding for new construction through such partnerships.

TB: As ARTBA's P3 Division president this year, what do you see as the value for being involved in its activities?

AUMENT: ARTBA and its members can take much credit for the expansion of P3s in the U.S. It is a privilege to be part of the leadership that has secured critical legislation over the last three decades – from the use of federal funds for new toll highways to preserving Private Activity Bonds, which were at risk recently.

Still, we know the U.S. market is lagging. Of \$120 billion spent on transportation infrastructure globally in 2017, only 13 percent of that investment was put to work in North America. We need to do better and must continually educate Washington decision makers about our experiences of P3s working for governments, taxpayers, and businesses.

ARTBA is bringing together the best of the industry, including contractors, designers, public officials, and P3 professionals – all working to tackle challenges and achieve allied goals. It has been energizing to join these advocates to drive our industry forward.