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LIFE BEYOND CRP

MELISSA COLE STREDER

Working at Caltrans as a systems planner for the San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, Melissa Cole Streder discusses her job and her professional trajectory since graduating in 2008, noting the importance of her internships and the experience she gained with the community outreach projects at CRP.

So much has happened since I graduated from Cal Poly's City and Regional Planning Program (CRP) in 2008. Plan as I might to control the direction of my life after college, the path that I ventured was anything but predictable and nothing further from the career aspirations I initially had for myself. I envisioned working for a private urban design firm or an environmental planning firm in a big city someday, but the reality of what was to come was quite the opposite.

Like many graduates today, my first full-time job opportunity in planning did not come right away. It took over six months to get a job, and it wasn't for a lack of trying. I must have filled out over thirty job applications to planning positions of every kind and all over the United States. I applied to everything from a low-income housing nonprofit organization in San Francisco to a large urban design firm in Colorado and everything in between. Deep down I had aspirations for a certain type of planning job, but I was willing and just about did apply to any planning position that I could get my hands on, even if I was only remotely qualified.

I wanted to get my foot in the door to gain some real life experience working in a planning capacity, and I was willing to go anywhere to get it. I was convinced then as I still am today that in this economy there is no room to be picky about what type of planning jobs you apply for. Apply for everything. What do you have to lose? The worst that can happen is that you get offered a job and have to say no.

This was my attitude as I applied and interviewed to jobs again and again and visited planning firms and public agencies. Numerous times I visited planning firms and departments, lobbying for a position or at least the opportunity to leave them with my resume and work samples. I was determined not to let the excuse of a bad economy stop me from getting a job. I put myself out there and, with persistence, it eventually paid off with a full-time job.

However, I also kept myself open to internship opportunities that would provide me with some experience and show my future employer that I was serious about planning. Just a few months after leaving Cal Poly, I was selected for an internship opportunity with the County of Marin Community Development Department. This experience provided me insight into how local government functions as well as a new perspective toward community outreach. I was hired primarily to assist with the development of the Department's Local Coastal Plan (LCP) update, specifically aiding in the organization and facilitation of community workshops for this effort.

The public outreach experiences I had in my CRP studio classes at Cal Poly prepared me well for planning and executing the LCP workshops. The logistics associated with organizing the public workshops went off without a hitch. However, when it came to the facilitation of these workshops it became apparent, "I wasn't in Kansas anymore." Marin County people were nothing like people from Traver or Nipomo (the communities I worked with in my CRP studio classes). They were definitely a different demographic of people--very vocal, wealthy, and highly educated. Having the opportunity to work with the communities of Sinton Beach, Muir Beach, and others along the Marin County Coast provided me with new perspective and equipped me with more tools for my planning toolbox.

This internship was action packed but short lived. Just a few months into my internship I got the call that would be a big life changer. As I was on my way home from Marin, ironically sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the I-580 in Richmond, I received a call from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). No they were not calling to rescue me from my two-hour commute back to the East Bay, but to offer me a full-time transportation planning position in their District 5 San Luis Obispo office. Accepting an opportunity to move back to San Luis Obispo and gain full-time planning experience was an easy decision.

I had no idea of what was in store for me at Caltrans, but I looked forward to learning more about what the job entailed. My recollection of transportation planning from college was that it was very technical, as I remembered past assignments standing at intersections counting cars and calculating turning volumes. I quickly discovered at Caltrans that while there is definitely a technical side to transportation planning, there is a strong political dimension as well.

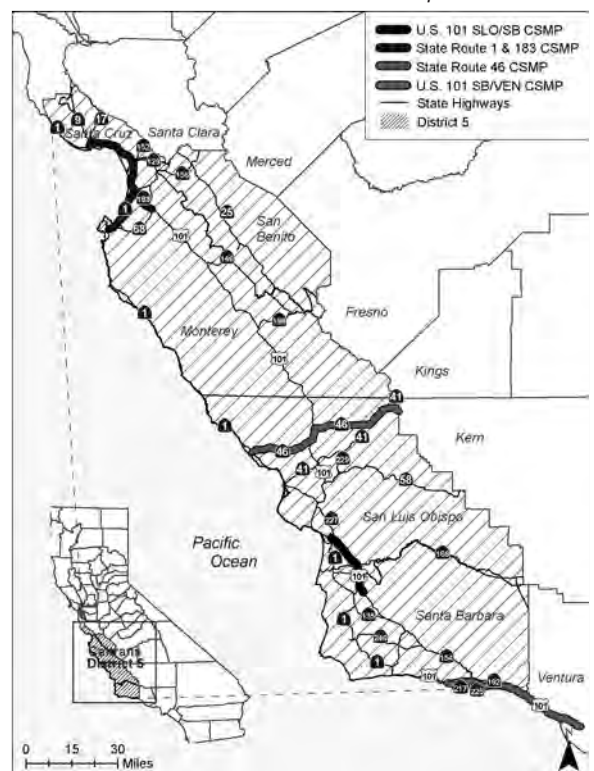
Just like working for a city or county planning department, there are many political factors guiding the decision-making process. However, in planning for the state transportation system, the scale of these factors is magnified. As one can imagine, maintaining mobility across California for the transportation of goods and people is a huge job. How the state transportation system is managed now and in the future will have direct impacts on local, state and national levels.

Needless to say, the size and complexity of the state transportation system is considerable. The Department of Transportation is divided into 12 districts that receive direction from the Caltrans headquarters office in Sacramento, who make sure that state and federal transportation policy decisions are implemented. The districts then make this happen working internally and with regional and local agencies to implement these policies.

At District 5, we maintain and operate 30 state and federal highways from Santa Barbara County to San Benito County, including those in the counties of San Luis Obispo, Monterey, and Santa Cruz. The District is made up of multiple branches composed of many units which include maintenance, construction, traffic operations, traffic safety, landscaping, design, project management, engineering, and planning. These are just some of the many units that make up each Caltrans district. I work in the Planning and Local Assistance branch, where there are multiple subunits. These include: Environmental Planning, Intergovernmental Review, Systems Planning, Regional Planning, and Advanced Planning. Additionally, each planning group has staff assigned to geographic areas within the District. Confused yet?

For the past two years I have worked as a Systems Planner in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties. The primary duty of a systems planner or long-range planner is to keep the 30 Transportation Concept Reports (TCRs) for each highway in the District up to date. Transportation Concept Reports for highways are similar in some respects to general plans for local agencies. They offer qualitative and quantitative information about each highway as well as a long-range concept for the route. I like to compare updating these documents to painting the Golden Gate Bridge: once it is finally finished, you have to start over again from the beginning. So many TCRs necessitate that we will be continually updating these documents.

Figure 1
Caltrans District 5, San Luis Obispo.



In Systems Planning we also have corridor plan assignments that trickle down from Caltrans Headquarters periodically. The latest and greatest assignment has been Corridor System Management Plans (CSMPs). In 2006, with the passage of Proposition 1B, funding was programmed to the Corridor Mobility Improvement Account (CMIA) for highway projects across the state. As a condition of the funding, the California Transportation Commission (CTC) required that a CSMP would be completed for all projects in the state that received CMIA funding.

Within District 5, CMIA funding has been programmed for four projects. I have been involved in all four of these projects in different ways, whether through providing GIS assistance, writing sections of the document, or facilitating team meetings. Currently, I am the lead on the CSMP effort for the Santa Maria River Bridges Widening CMIA project located on US 101 at the Santa Barbara/San Luis Obispo county border. The CMIA project will widen the current four-lane bridge to six-lanes and add a Class I bicycle path. The CSMP itself will extend from Clark Avenue on US 101 in Santa Barbara County to Grand Avenue in Arroyo Grande.

Working on Corridor System Management Plans for the District has been a rewarding experience that allowed me the opportunity to use some of the tools from the planning toolbox that I acquired during my time in the CRP program at Cal Poly. As I look back at that time, I feel especially grateful for the opportunities I had in my studio courses to “learn by doing” and expand my social and team working skills through working collaboratively with others.

have found that in my current job, being able to communicate with people and work collaboratively is one of the most valuable and essential skills I could have. Due to the size and complexity of Caltrans, it is rare that I ever work on a project entirely by myself. I am constantly running projects by people in different units and

up the ranks of management in my own unit. Often, as is the case with the CSMPs, I also commonly need to coordinate with representatives from local cities and counties, transit agencies, and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO’s) to get a job done. It has become more and more apparent to me that to be an effective planner you have to be an excellent listener and communicator.

This was one reason I advocated chartering a Toastmasters club at Caltrans District 5. Toastmasters clubs exist all over the world with a mission to help individuals develop better leadership and communication skills. Our club SLO Motion Toastmasters was officially chartered just over six months ago, and it offers weekly one-hour meetings for members to exercise prepared and impromptu speaking. Through my involvement in this club, I have become a better, more confident speaker and have had the joy of watching my colleagues and friends improve their speaking abilities as well.

suspect that my involvement in Toastmasters factored into the decision by upper management in Caltrans to transition me into Regional Planning from Systems Planning beginning January 2011. As the new Regional Planner for Santa Barbara County, I serve as the liaison between Caltrans, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for Santa Barbara County, and the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG). I facilitate state funding for SBCAG and provide support on Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs), Overall Work Programs (OWPs), and transit studies. I also

Figure 2
Muir Beach vista point.
(photo by the author)



represent Caltrans as a voting member on the SBCAG Technical Transportation Advisory Committee (TTAC), working with public works directors from local agencies in Santa Barbara County. In this capacity I spend much more time outside of the office working face to face with local and regional decision makers. Without my involvement in Toastmasters, and the opportunities it has given me to practice and improve my public speaking skills, I would not have had the confidence needed to excel in my new position.

The last two years have been a whirlwind of big steps and new experiences, and I couldn't feel more blessed that I was one of the lucky ones who was able to get a job in planning and stay in San Luis Obispo. If there is any advice I would give to upcoming graduates, it would be: don't let a bad economy be the excuse but the motivation to be persistent and exhaustive in the manner of how you pursue opportunities to grow. This can be through an unpaid internship, additional training, an interview, or visiting a firm. The full-time job opportunity may not be at the tip of your fingers, but if you are willing to give it your all, the job will come in time.

If you have a positive attitude and perseverance, it is not a matter of if but of when. And remember, the means to an end goal is part of what makes the journey so great, so don't forget to enjoy the ride. I wouldn't change my path from graduation to where I am today for the world. Sure, there were times when I was stressed and anxious about finding that full-time job, but you should feel comfort in knowing that this is something everyone goes through and is just temporary. Also remember to apply for everything. I have been encouraged just in the last few months that three of my CRP colleagues and friends were selected for full-time jobs with different transportation planning agencies across the state. Even if the position doesn't sound like your dream job initially, it can at least serve as a stepping-stone to something else in the future. Go for it, and you may be pleasantly surprised with the outcome. I know I was.