

## Spotlight on Greg Errett

Bachelor of Science in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly, 1979

### Insights for Future Planners Views by Alumnus Greg Errett, AICP

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*The City and Regional Department has been generously supported by the Errett-Fisher Foundation for many years. Greg Errett, one of the foundation's board members and CRP alumnus, spoke to our students on his long experience as transportation planner, and pointed out some of the challenges for future planning professionals. MCRP student Jennifer Hooper reports on Mr. Errett's presentation.*

On October 16, 2015, Department Head Hemalata Dandekar, introduces a classroom full of MCRP students to an alumnus of the planning program, Mr. Greg Errett, AICP. She describes Mr. Errett as a modest gentleman, and a successful, innovative transportation planner. That Friday morning, Greg Errett's quiet sense of humor engages the group of students immediately. Surprisingly, he tells us that he is a native of Santa Barbara – he has picked up an accent from living and practicing planning in the southern United States for the past 35 years.

Greg Errett attended Cal Poly from 1975 to 1979, and earned a degree in City and Regional Planning. "My era is completely different than yours... but, a lot of the issues in transportation are the same," he says and mentions congestion, air quality, social and environmental justice, placement of facilities, sidewalks, highways, and improvements. For the past 22 years, Mr. Errett has worked for the City of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, as Transportation Planning Manager. He plans to retire from the profession in eight weeks, and in this presentation at CRP he wanted to share his legacy project and all that he has learned from a full career.

As he sees it, Mr. Errett's work has culminated with "by far, the most enjoyable project of my whole career." The story starts with Business Route Interstate 40 that runs through Downtown Winston-Salem. In a stretch of less than two miles there are five interchanges that cause numerous, severe accidents regularly. There are also more than ten bridges crossing the highway in this short span. Most of the bridges date from the 1950s and "their sufficiency ratings are very poor, and they need to be rehabbed or replaced."

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) identified the need for improvement of the roadway and the bridges, and chose to close the route through downtown Winston-Salem for two years during construction. Rather than through a piecemeal process with traffic delays lasting six or more years, NCDOT will replace all bridges at once in the shorter timeframe. Mr. Errett compares this to "basically shutting down Highway 101 from Grand Avenue to Higuera Street" in San Luis Obispo.

*Greg Errett with CRP Department Head Hema Dandekar.*



Planning for this massive project began over seven years ago, and Mr. Errett saw this as a “golden opportunity” to build on Winston-Salem’s push to reinvent itself as a desirable place to live and work. The City currently has a population of 400,000 and wishes to attract more young professionals to the area. More than \$1.2 billion have been privately invested downtown, and the City is witnessing the transformation of dozens of old manufacturing facilities and warehouses into an innovation district specializing in medicine, medical technology, and biotech research.

In the early stages of planning for this project, Mr. Errett collaborated with local community groups, including the Arts Council of Winston-Salem and the Creative Corridors Coalition, to bring quality design, public participation (“over 100 public meetings”), and critical sustainability elements to the project. The highlight and backbone of the project championed by Errett is a multi-use path (MUP) that will run parallel to the section of I-40, built within the right-of-way. Mr. Errett recalls that “when we introduced the concept, people were aghast...” but he used the Golden Gate Bridge as a comparison of bicycle and pedestrian lanes sharing space with auto traffic, along with other examples from around the world.

The MUP will be combined with the installment of walking bridges, expanded sidewalks, greenways, and strollways to create a network of active transportation that aims to connect the revitalized downtown to the suburbs. The construction will also provide the potential for the designation of new parkland, real estate frontage development, the rehabilitation of buildings and structures, and opportunities to infuse art and design that honor Winston-Salem’s heritage into the space. Mr. Errett describes the project as a “game-changing opportunity to develop world-class bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.”

Since several of CRP’s Masters students are working towards a dual MCRP/MSTransportation degree, Mr. Errett’s presentation was particularly relevant. His presentation covered many of the challenges found in the practice of planning and how to overcome and learn from them. In the Q & A period the issue of racial sensitivity within the community of Winston-Salem was raised. Dr. Dandekar and Mr. Errett built on each other’s descriptions of what they have learned over the course of careers in planning for diverse communities. Dr. Dandekar provides insight to students about “bringing your ethical framework to the planning exercise and inserting it at those points in the decision-making process where you can actually make a difference.” Mr. Errett adds that in practice it becomes a learning experience to engage sensibilities and priorities, work habits, and how you talk and approach people with sensitivity and awareness.

We also heard about the challenges of funding, which require ongoing staff commitment and establishing the critical infrastructure and demonstration projects that will engender more investment. Project phasing demands complex

forethought and planning to develop priority orders and begin projects in such a way that additions can be made efficiently. On the part of the planner, this takes a deep understanding of the intricacies of city infrastructure. Public-private partnerships are also crucial, involving the maintenance of relationships over many years.

Finally, Mr. Errett tells students to not be discouraged planning in a conservative environment. He suggested that inspiration in the field of planning can be found around the United States, “if you dig just a little bit.” He challenges us future planners to push the status quo and to find innovative ideas through attending planning conferences and to experience firsthand travel.

Through this conversation with Mr. Greg Errett, we learned that a successful planner will find areas of specialization over the course of a career, but will also gain skills in a broad range of subjects. Mr. Errett specializes in transportation but has clearly acquired knowledge on the topics of construction and building materials, economic development, landscape architecture, land use, parks, public outreach, public speaking, real estate development, and urban design, among many others.

Mr. Errett has been a supporter of the City and Regional Planning Department at Cal Poly for many years. Planning students and faculty are grateful for the wisdom that he has been able to share, and for the ongoing way that he facilitates learning by doing for Cal Poly planning students by making trips and experiences possible. Greg Errett is helping to inspire students in the way that he has attributed much of the success in his career in planning.