

What's Next – Jeanne Acutanza

Now might be a good time to re-share my first encounter with Secretary Pete Buttigieg. Mid-February 2019, I heard a “Gay, millennial, mayor running for President” was coming to a book lecture at the Seattle Library. I was curious, bought the book to be ready for the book signing, and stood in line at the large library auditorium. As he read and spoke, I became more intrigued. Here was a mayor using data dashboards to convey not just to his staff but to be transparent with the community. One story specifically of how the city was using gunshot recognition sensors to increase police responsiveness struck me. He noted that what the data revealed was not only areas with a higher incidence of gun activity but also, unexpectedly, where public reaction varied by neighborhood. In specific communities, people didn't call or were slow to call when shots were fired, maybe due to a lack of confidence in a response. It was a new metric to consider – *improving*



confidence in police response, equitably, across the city. When he signed my book, I said, “You had me at data-driven performance.” He laughed. The moment reminded me of fictional West Wing character Josh Lyman hearing then-candidate Jed Bartlet for the first time. Here was a guy who knew this stuff was challenging and extremely complicated. He was not interested in popular slogans and promises. He understood you could make mistakes. He was instead looking to do the hard work to improve people's lives. His credibility rose even more with his humility in admitting he wasn't perfect, stating during one debate that “He didn't get it (police reform) done.” A guy with his kid stopped by our campaign booth to tell me that statement increased Pete's credibility.

Now, on the eve of moving forward with a significant investment in infrastructure, is a good time to reflect on this. *The real work starts after the bill is passed.* A question I submitted for the Secretary at a recent [technical conference](#) was, “How can we improve performance measurement to make sure these are the right investments?” The current bills being discussed are large and will come with intense scrutiny. The Secretary's response was, of course, eloquent, and I am ineloquently paraphrasing. First, not all of the measures exist. In fact, many outcomes we desire around equity, mobility, climate, and safety are unwritten and part of what the transportation industry is working to develop. For example, the notion of “mobility,” or what I call “access to opportunity,” is forever changed through this pandemic and our adaptations to work-, school-, and shop- *from home*. Our approach to climate needs to move rapidly rather than glacially, and to that end, our response needs to be dramatic, and measurements may need to catch up.

Representative of his love of Ulysses, Pete brought up the mundane categories of safety and maintenance. Everyone loves a ribbon-cutting, but as he stated, we have to be concerned at the “total cost of ownership” of a piece of infrastructure, not just the huge dollars (and related jobs) to construct but also the dollars (and jobs) to keep this stuff in good working order. Related to safety, he noted we all likely know of traffic fatalities. How do we shift the perspective that these traffic deaths are truly *unacceptable*? The discretionary granting process for how a good portion of these funds will be distributed also serves as that sandbox/laboratory to identify measures/metrics. Are local agencies

solving their own problems and achieving better outcomes? These projects will gain attention in competitive grant processes. Are agencies applying connected vehicle technology to achieve greater efficiency, lower emissions, and fewer crashes? Do they measure the sustainability and resilience of the infra they build? Are they looking at safety outcomes in measurable ways? Here we at least have some research as part of the Highway Safety Manual, including [Crash Modification Factors](#).

Finally, in responding to a question regarding how the profession of transportation engineers can support the Secretary and USDOT, Pete Buttigieg urged us to “take care and examine the *moral challenges*” of our actions. We should break down the top line of what we are doing to consider not only the good we are doing but the counterbalance of where we might be doing damage. There may be a gap here in how we define, measure, and monitor the effects of these actions across a spectrum of users. We need to consider not only who lives there (using tools like [EJScreen](#)) but who works, goes to school, and requires these infrastructure investments.

After the bill passes is when the real work begins for the Secretary of Transportation. The whistle-stop tours and vote-shopping will be over, and the heavy weight of making decisions that really impact people’s lives begins. I know a guy who is up for it, ready to take this deep dive, who has been waiting for **what’s next**.