

Remarks at the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials Inaugural Kickoff Event

Rob Gannon, General Manager, King County Metro Transit

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Good evening.

Thank you for the kind introduction. It is an honor to be asked to speak at this event and join distinguished colleagues at the podium for this evening's agenda.

I want to offer my thanks to Mr. Mims, for joining us in Seattle to launch the Washington Chapter. To Mr. Massie, I am humbled to be on the stage with a transportation leader of your experience, with so many notable contributions to the field. (I see Mr. Rogoff regularly, and I am grateful for his leadership in the region and his support as a close colleague.)

Many thanks are due for the work that went into preparing tonight's gala event. We simply would not be here without the hours put in by Everett and Gretchen, and so many others. My sincere thanks to all of you for bringing together what I hope will be remembered as an inspiring kick-off to our state's chapter.

There are many leaders in our midst tonight, and some worthy of the title "hero." But in King County, our leader-hero, deserving of our recognition, King County Councilmember Larry Gossett.

As other speakers have indicated, we are asked tonight to present our thoughts on issues impacting the future of transportation—population growth, advances in technology and the ever-evolving expectations of transportation consumers, whether we call them customers, riders, or constituents.

All of those are important topics and warrant clear eyed thinking and planning. But from where I sit, I take a different view on the future of transportation. Or perhaps it's less about "the view" than it is about the way I would like to frame the issue.

But before I begin I need to enter an agreement with all of you. For sake of argument, I ask you to grant me one premise, built on these assumptions:

1. We are all committed transportation professionals (or the very fortunate spouses of transportation professionals).
2. We believe that transportation is more than mere infrastructure. It is economic development.
3. The field of transportation represents the essential connections between communities. It is the manifestation of opportunity.

With these points in mind, the premise I ask you to grant is that access to transportation is a human right. If you agree, then I hope my remarks hold together. If you do not indulge the premise, my remarks collapse on themselves, and there's no need to continue.

Transportation is a human right. Agreed?

I will lay out my thoughts by way of three quotes. The first comes from a nationally recognized speaker on the topic of diversity, Joe Gerstandt. He says:

“If you do not intentionally, deliberately and proactively include, you will unintentionally exclude.” – Joe Gerstandt

This statement has an artful simplicity to it, and it has informed a good deal of thinking and planning inside King County Metro. It first came into play when our agency constructed our Partnership to Achieve Comprehensive Equity, or PACE, a labor management partnership to address institutionalized and structural racism inside of Metro. The quote became an oft invoked reminder of how purposeful work can begin to change outcomes in important ways.

On a personal level the quote and its core concept of intentional inclusion reminds me of the sometimes-dramatic difference between “yes” and “no”, and the divides that can be crossed when the answer to a question shifts. King County Metro’s participation in the formation of the COMTO chapter rests in that quote. Some number of years ago, one senior leader at Metro approached another and asked the question: can we initiate a COMTO chapter, and will you support the chapter with the resources or the agency? The answer, sadly, was “No.” Justifiable reasons must certainly have been offered, but still the answer was “no.”

Then sometime last year, when the question was asked again, between two different leaders, and this time in the light of our efforts to address equity and social justice, and with “intentionality” informing our thinking— the answer turned to YES. And we found that a similar question was being presented at Sound Transit, and their answer was an emphatic YES. And more questions were being asked around the city and region, with still more responses in the affirmative.

A Washington chapter of COMTO is born, thanks to the beneficence and vision of Sound Transit and King County Metro, and the bold leadership of Rob Gannon. For he intentionally included! Now, if self-aggrandizing is to be our national norm of leadership, my remarks and this event have reached an awkward moment. We all know too well, that when you control the instruments of power, and also the narrative of how power is wielded, a dangerous combination is let loose.

But let me throw the switch, avert that personal train wreck, and shift directions [radically] by acknowledging that white privilege exists, and I am among its beneficiaries. This, I hope you will see, is a different demonstration of leadership, but let me first illustrate:

Which of these statements is the better narrative of my success?

I put myself through college and graduate school. I cut my management teeth at Amazon.com, working my way up from entry level to director level. I left history’s most successful internet start-up to pursue a career in public service. I demonstrated organizational leadership and political savvy to become a general manager of one of the nation’s leading Transit agencies.

-or-

I left college three times before finally finishing. My father died in the parking lot of his favorite bar. I took a minimum wage job, stuck with it before being laid off. I filed for bankruptcy. I moved home, with few options and luckily found employment in a down economy. Divorced, I followed my kids back to Seattle, and found another job, barely paying off a mountain of debt.

Are both sets of statements believable? Certainly. As you likely surmised, it is both histories woven together that shape the full picture of who I am today. Please, do not think I am describing this to receive accolades or describe a “hard work and faith conquers all” story.

But what questions might prove interesting at this point? Given what I just stated, all true, and knowing that I became a transportation CEO with scarcely 3 years experience in the industry, would my story be as likely if I were female? If my last name was “Running Bear?” If my first language was Spanish, an accent draping my every uttered word? If I am a devout Muslim? If my skin is black?

Or: if I am tall, male, athletic, well spoken, affable and white?

This is what I submit to you: That what I have achieved, IS attributable to hard work and experience, and without any doubt, that it could have been similarly accomplished by an African American female, or a Muslim immigrant.

But the evidence I display standing here before you, if only a sample size of 1, is that “good fortune” accounts disproportionately for my success, and success not fully earned but realized nonetheless...is privilege.

I do not contend that this example is insurmountable proof of the existence of white privilege. However, I am making clear my own conclusion: that my success is not entirely of my own making. I am the beneficiary of white privilege.

Let me transition this back toward COMTO, inserting the second quote, this time from the Catholic theologian and writer Thomas Merton. He offered this puzzling phrase: “There is no solution in withdrawal. No solution in conforming.”

This statement seems especially relevant to our times, and to the work in front of us with our new COMTO chapter. And to an individual struggling to understand his own privilege. I will find no solution in withdrawing from the challenges that today’s systems of oppression present, and I cannot conform by simply accepting its benefits. But acknowledging the problem is not enough.

The trick of the Merton koan, is there is no clear solution. Not in withdrawal, not in conforming. Then where? Our Buddhist colleagues will remind us: a koan is an intentional struggle, a puzzle of deeper meaning that must be wrestled with.

COMTO is the next phase of my struggle.

This path of my argument meanders: transportation is a human right; inclusion must be intentional; “yes” gives way to partnership and opportunity; privilege exists; neither withdrawal nor conforming bring about change. I want to believe that COMTO can be the organizer of change, the leading advocate for transportation as human right.

Enter now quote number 3, from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: “Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny.”

As a founding member of the Washington chapter of COMTO, I do not believe that serving as an industry organization dedicated to creating opportunities for minority professionals to advance in the

field is enough. To be clear, it is a most worthy endeavor. But we must be more than an affinity group in a critical sector.

Where else can you find what we have? The coming together of the public sector and the private. The urgency the industry faces, especially here in Washington State and the Puget Sound area. The confluence of highly experienced professionals committed to finding opportunity for people of color.

I am not prescribing a specific agenda— that is the work ahead of us. But I am suggesting— arguing— URGING— that we attempt to do what no single agency, no government, or company, or student group or labor union can do on its own. Let's bind together to address the lingering and pernicious effects of racism in all forms. Let's set a course that presses the issue beyond the borders of our chapter. Let's unite under one banner that has too long been brought down by the divergent agendas of identity politics.

That is, let's accept the premise that access to transportation is a human right. Let us never forget that when we do not intentionally, deliberately and proactively include, we unintentionally exclude, and the damage is ever more difficult to undo. Let us assert to all bystanders: there is no solution in withdrawal; no solution in conforming. And finally, let the Washington chapter of COMTO be those creative dissenters that will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny.

That is what I see as the future challenge in transportation. That is why I am so honored, and humbled, to a founding member of this chapter of the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials.

Thank you.

Dedicated to Richard Malone and the memory of Leonard Thomas.