ITE JOURNAL: Your professional bio says that “urban planning is anthropology.” How does that sentiment come into play when planning and designing our communities?

JONES: Given that so much of the focus of urban planning is understanding the dynamic relationship between humans and their environment and how to address the challenges facing our communities—from housing affordability, to mobility access, to resiliency and public health—the multidisciplinary, “systems-level” nature of anthropology is well suited to contemporary urban planning and engineering. Looking at the long arc of the human condition lends a unique perspective when it comes to engaging with the public and understanding the broader cultural context in which such habits, needs, and wants are framed. Much of people’s identity has an intrinsic link to the local community. Understanding the not-so-obvious tension between space, geography, available resources, and the local inhabitants enables you to develop a more complete story about a particular community, improving the likelihood of success when proposing planning or design solutions. People are at the core of planning. The location, design and programming of streets, buildings, parks, schools and other infrastructure can’t be performed in a vacuum. Taking a page from the anthropological handbook can create a better connection to people, experience, and future desires.

ITEJ: How are “complete streets” and safety inextricably linked?

JONES: By definition, a “complete street” is one that is planned, designed, implemented, operated, and maintained to enable safe access and mobility for all users. This basis for complete streets is fundamentally rooted in safety with the recognition that for the past 60 years transportation infrastructure has largely supported the needs of the car. While there are undoubtedly benefits and freedoms offered by the automobile, the drawbacks are obvious. Ever-growing traffic congestion, climate issues, preventable diseases, increasing rates of pedestrian and cyclist injuries and fatalities, as well as housing and neighborhood inequities can be tied to unfettered suburban growth patterns and unsafe street design focused solely on moving cars. Complete streets shift the focus to people, correcting the imbalance of the past. There’s no one-size-fits all prescription, but typical ingredients may include sidewalks, bike lanes, accessible transit stops, safe crossings and pedestrian signals, curb extensions, and more. The complete streets approach is centered upon creating better places, balancing the safety and convenience interests of many types of users. Ultimately, how we design streets reflects how we feel about people!

ITEJ: What advice would you give other transportation professionals when working with local, state, and national leaders to achieve these measures and greater accountability in their communities?

JONES: The real message is to prioritize people and quality of place. For far too long, our traditional transportation policy and investments have centered around high-speed, high-capacity roadways over other modes of transportation. The few additional seconds of convenience to motorists has come at the expense of the many lives lost walking, cycling, or taking transit, particularly in lower-income and communities of color. Future transportation investments need to make safety the focus for moms walking strollers, the elderly, those who bike or take transit to work, the people. This needs to be communicated to leadership at all levels. We should be incentivizing vulnerable road user safety. So, my advice is: Continue to be a champion. Ask yourself why you got into this industry and how you can utilize your expertise to make your community—your world—a better place.