Introduction

I was very grateful to receive one of the 2009 Young Professional's Awards. This provided me the opportunity to attend the 2009 Institute of Transportation Engineers Annual Meeting and Exhibit in San Antonio, Texas – an opportunity I would not have had otherwise. I am also grateful to my employer, Morrison-Maierle, for funding the difference between the conference cost and the scholarship amount. This was my first attendance at a major conference. I have always enjoyed and appreciated the monthly Arizona ITE Section meetings and the annual Arizona ITE / IMSA conference. The Women's Transportation Seminar monthly meetings in Arizona are also very informative to me. I knew that this international meeting would be exciting and would reveal much to me about my profession.

I was excited about three specifics of the conference. First, it provided the chance for me to meet highly respected individuals in the transportation industry. Next, it allowed me to observe conference and program structures and schedules that I could suggest within my own Arizona Section of ITE and the Women’s Transportation Seminar in Arizona. This introduction encouraged me to consider involvement in planning for the Arizona Section ITE / IMSA 2010 Spring Conference and perhaps the 2013 ITE Western District 6 Meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. Finally, and most importantly, it introduced me to the benefits and detriments of a wide variety of transportation innovations implemented in other parts of the nation and the world. This was of particular interest to me as I can consider these ideas for implementation on transportation projects in the Phoenix Metropolitan Area. The exposure to the ideas, thought processes, problems, and solutions for new and refined traffic and transportation situations was very educational for me.

“Gray Hairs”

I found the common use of the phrase “Gray Hairs” amusing. I wish there was a similar endearing phrase for people in my age group. “Newbies” just isn’t as complimentary. Since I graduated from high school in this century and graduated from Arizona State University only two years ago, I am at the opposite end of the age and experience spectrum. One of the true benefits of this conference was recognizing how much I have to learn and the excellent resources that are available to me. The wealth of experience, knowledge, and intelligence of the individuals in the traffic engineering and transportation planning disciplines amazed me. I hope that I am always fortunate enough to be in the company of “gray hairs”.

The thought of attending a multi-day event with over 500 people from the transportation industry throughout the world was intimidating. When I arrived in San Antonio, I was nervous. Within 15 minutes, I met two ITE members on the SA Trans as we travelled from the airport to our hotels. These distinguished gentlemen were long time members of ITE and highly respected individuals in the transportation industry. They instantly welcomed me with their interest in me, my projects, my company, and my career. I received great advice on which meetings to attend and worthwhile activities to explore. This encounter boosted my self-confidence. Their frequent presence throughout the conference ensured that I was maximizing my benefits from the conference experience.
My 2009 Annual Meeting Experience in San Antonio, Texas
By Yung Cossar, EIT, Morrison-Maierle, Inc.

Mid-Level Professionals
At the Transportation Consultants Council Executive Committee meeting on Sunday afternoon, I met the President of ITE District 6 – my district, the western United States. He was one of the few people at the conference that was familiar with my employer. His intense involvement with ITE on both international and local levels was an example for me. I hope to emulate his professional participation as I immediately recognized the benefits he has offered to our traffic and transportation profession and its individuals. One example of his involvement was as a panelist in the session titled “Becoming a Leader in the Transportation Profession: Tools to Grow Your Career Conversation Circle”. His comments encouraged me to develop my interests. I soon volunteered to serve on the Pedestrian and Bicycle Council, and the Climate Change and Energy Task Force.

Young Professionals
For most of the scholarship winners, this was also their first attendance at a major conference. Several of us quickly became acquainted and were the familiar face in the crowd to each other during the conference sessions. In the evenings, our group discussed the conference, the economy, the profession, our careers, and our jobs while enjoying dinner. Although we were from opposite sides of the nation, we discovered numerous similarities and commonalities.

In one afternoon, I met people from all stages in their career. They all gave me advice, support, and encouragement throughout the duration of the conference.

Technical Sessions
I attended ten technical sessions in the three days of the conference. I didn't attend all the sessions in one track. Instead, I chose sessions based on my interests and how well the session topic related to my past, present, and potential future projects. At the “Pedestrian and Bicycle Design and Operations” session I learned about new innovations in pedestrian detection and warning. A small town in Arizona has been corresponding with Morrison-Maierle regarding a pedestrian crossing in their downtown. I mentioned this project to an individual at the session with many years of pedestrian experience and received confirmation that my ideas were good and also received a tip to improve pedestrian safety.

“Active Traffic Management” was one of the most interesting sessions. The application of active traffic management in Europe provides an example and a high standard for similar system implementation in the United States. Variable speed limits and variable warning signs for queuing or construction provided immediate and meaningful information enabling drivers to travel from point A to point B faster and safer. I also recognized the benefits of using shoulder lanes to increase capacity on the roadway during peak hours. I have heard of these innovations before through another member of the Arizona ITE chapter and hope to see the Phoenix Metropolitan Area as a future home of active traffic management.

Comprehensive Signal Retiming in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in the “Best Practices for Traffic Signal Operations and Maintenance” session was an example of a large metropolitan
area providing optimized signal timing over jurisdictional boundaries. I was responsible for the early stages of two signal optimization projects in metropolitan Phoenix. One of these two projects required jurisdictional coordination, and experienced varying levels of success. It was interesting to learn the high potential for success that other metropolitan areas have achieved. I hope to be involved in the implementation of similar cross-jurisdictional efforts in the Phoenix area. This presentation revealed to me the complexities involved with multiple agencies, several perspectives, and conflicting variables. This session encouraged me to seek and accept new professional challenges of all types.

San Antonio, Texas

The conference setting was delightful. Coming from the intense heat of Phoenix, I was not as affected by the weather in San Antonio as many other conference attendees.

I have been fortunate to travel to cities throughout the United States and in several other countries. This was my first visit to the state of Texas. I was impressed by both the strong cultural traditions and the urban planning innovations. The history of the Alamo was powerful – especially recognizing that I have lived most of my life in another state that borders Mexico. This visit encouraged me to explore more about the historical and cultural aspects of my home state.

The Riverwalk was most entertaining – especially the variety of delicious restaurants. The Riverwalk Boat Tour was a great way to learn about how the Riverwalk was formed and the history of the buildings and artwork that call the Riverwalk home. Arizona has an extensive network of canals – particularly in its metropolitan areas. Near my office there is also a formerly dry riverbed that has been partially dammed to provide a lake. My experience with the San Antonio Riverwalk gives me hope that we in Arizona will continue our initial developments adjacent to our water features.

After learning about the history of San Antonio and the growth that occurred there for HemisFair ’68, I was immediately intrigued with World’s Fairs. The Tower of the Americas, built for the HemisFair’68, proudly displays the history of Texas, and spectacular views of San Antonio. Thanks to Wikipedia, I have learned that World’s Fairs are now called Expositions. Expo 2010 will be in Shanghai, China.

After the Conference

After my experience at the 2009 ITE Annual Conference and Exhibit, I wanted to immediately start using my new knowledge and maintain the connections I had made. At the conference, I met someone from the Texas Transportation Institute that worked on the Houston METRO collision study. I am working on a study of the METRO Light Rail collisions that have occurred in the City of Phoenix and was able to contact and receive valuable assistance from this person. In addition, Morrison-Maierle has recently proposed on a project that required international experience on the effects of speed and red light photo enforcement on collisions. We were able to team with another individual from the Texas Transportation Institute who formerly lived and worked in Arizona.
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Attending the conference has truly inspired me to become more involved with ITE on both local and international levels. Due to the encouragement I received from multiple individuals over the four days that I was in San Antonio, I have submitted an abstract to ITE to present findings from the Phoenix METRO Light Rail Collision Study at either the 2010 Technical Conference in Savannah, Georgia or the 2010 Annual Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Conclusion

I wish to immensely thank the Transportation Consultant’s Council for offering travel assistance scholarships for Young Professionals to attend ITE’s Annual Meetings and Exhibits. I am also grateful to my employer, Morrison-Maierle, for funding the difference between the conference cost and the scholarship. This was a tremendous professional development opportunity for me and I look forward to my future involvement with ITE at a local and international level.