

DARREN ASPER

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Avigail Oren: ...record on this computer. Do you guys see that there is a little recording button showing up for you?

Linda Boxx: Yes.

Darren Asper: Yes.

Avigail Oren: And all right. So, I always begin with just a, you know, a standard introduction. So, what is it? It's today, Thursday, March 19th, 2020. I'm finally remembering that it's 2020. It's about 1:30 p.m. and we're on a Zoom video conference call. My name is Avigail Oren and I'm here with Linda Boxx and Darren Asper. And in this interview, what we're going to focus on is Delta Development Group's work with the legislative and executive branches of Pennsylvania and the federal- the United States federal government, both to release funding necessary for the successful completion of the Great Allegheny Passage Rails-to-Trails project and to get funding from the federal government as well for the completion of the project. We'll quickly discuss how a Delta Development Group came to be and what your role was and remains at Delta Development. And we'll dive into how you first connected with the Allegheny Trail Alliance then the strategies that were used to help the GAP receive government funding. So, let's start with just some quick background. Can you tell me a little bit about the Delta Development Group and its history when you came to work there and what your involvement and your role has been through the years?

Darren Asper: Yes, Delta Development Group started in 1988. It was started by Don Mazziotti. Don was the Secretary of Commerce for Pennsylvania under Governor Casey, Sr. And so, there was a point in time where Don approached LeRoy Kline, the other partner, and they were both working in state government and LeRoy was the government liaison with the house for the Department of Commerce. So, they actually started the company on Presidents' Day 1988. So, that's our anniversary and that's when it started. I started with the company in September 1996. So, I've been with the company almost 24 years and I've been part of the Community and Economic

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Development practice. I lead that. So, we've been involved in many projects. This project being one of my favorites over the years. And then a lot of community development and also work with a lot of private developers helping them to secure funding for projects and navigate permitting and the permitting environment. So, that's a little bit about the Delta background and how I became involved.

Avigail Oren: Okay. So, to bring it back around to the Great Allegheny Passage – do you recall, like, what are your earliest memories of hearing about the Great Allegheny Passage? When did the project come across your desk, your consciousness?

Darren Asper: Yeah. Well, I know that my boss, LeRoy Kline, was in a meeting with, I think, it was Mike's Zamias, correct, Linda?

Linda Boxx: Yes.

Darren Asper: You had a meeting in Pittsburgh and I think Linda was working with Mike or knew Mike and Mike had worked...

[Crosstalk]

Linda Boxx: Well, let me explain how that meeting happened.

Darren Asper: Okay.

Linda Boxx: And that's why I was hoping that LeRoy, of course, would be here. I was looking through my calendar for 1997. And I could not quite pick out the meeting date. I know it was summertime. Mike Zamias was working on a development at Robinson Town Centre and was having some issues with not the Montour Trail Council, but the watershed organization that was involved in that area – I'll think of the name. But Dick Quasi was also on that watershed board. And Mike was trying to, you know, get a crossing up the stream or something. And he had called a meeting with Dick Quasi and Marshall Fausold to come and meet with him because he wanted to, you know, have a, you know, gentlemanly, just discussion about it. Marshall and Dick called me and said, "Oh, you better come to this meeting, too," you know. And so, I- and Bob Teeter came to that meeting as well. So, it was, you know, I'm meeting Mike for the first time and Dick and Marshall – I think they just really

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wanted moral support for that meeting and make sure that they weren't compromising in any way the trail development, which we were also so much engaged in. LeRoy was at one end of the table and I was at the other. We were in the Oxford Club and Mike was serving hundred-dollar bottle of Chardonnay or whatever, you know, it was quite a luncheon. And LeRoy and I- I was sitting beside Mike and LeRoy and I started talking across the table, like, down this long table and Mike said, "Hey, you two need to talk to each other." So, he got up and went to the other end of the table and LeRoy sat beside me. And we were like, you know, just hit it off immediately. And we're, you know, talking about the trail, really, and the whole issue, whatever the issue was with Montour run, I guess it was, with that watershed organization- the Hollow Oak Land Trust.

Darren Asper: Yeah, that's what it was.

Linda Boxx: Yeah. That item really never got discussed. Because we were talking about finishing the Great Allegheny Passage and I just really liked LeRoy from the very beginning. As we were walking up the street back to Mike's office at the Dollar Bank building with the great, red sandstone biomes out front – Mike gave me my marching orders so clearly on the way up the street. And LeRoy had got- I think, you know, Tony might even have been at that meeting.

Darren Asper: Yeah, Anthony Seitz, Tony Seitz.

Linda Boxx: Okay. So, Tony and LeRoy went their way and we're walking up the street. And Mike said to me, "You've got to act fast. You have got to act fast. Your time is right now. We have a governor who likes to ride bicycles," and that would be Tom Ridge. You know, "You have Jack Murtha, who, you know, represents part of the district, who's one of the most powerful people in Washington. You have Secretary of DCNR, John Oliver, who's on board, you know, wants this done. You have Bud Shuster, who's the head of the Transportation Infrastructure Committee who's from Western Pennsylvania. You know, your time is right to get out there and get this money and you need to hire Delta Development." And I pledged \$25,000 in helping to get them on board. And so, I

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thought like, "Wow, he really laid it out very clearly and made it- and he was right. This was the time right now to get a hold of this and go big because otherwise, you know, as I've called it, Avigail, the "golden age of trail building" would pass us by. And there's opportunities for funding. So, we had, you know, whatever meetings to sort of negotiate a contract with Delta to try to figure out what was expected. I had no idea what I was doing, you know. I'm just like, "Okay, this seems like a [inaudible 0:08:37.4]." And John Oliver had said after we got the line item in the state capital budget, you know, shake, shake, shake his finger, "You need to hire a lobbyist." Now, what we hired Delta to do was not quote "lobby work," but it was really to help us develop a, you know, a public funding strategy, which is what we did. I think it was our December 1997 ATA board meeting where LeRoy- well, I guess you weren't there yet. Maybe it was Tony, came to the board, you know, to Somerset, you know, everyone met everybody. And we agreed to hire Delta for, you know, a period of two years to help us with the funding strategy. Our foundation made a grant to the Regional Trail Corporation for the benefit of ATA. So, that could be financed because we didn't have, you know, the money to just to hire Delta at that time. So, then, Delta and the Delta team, you know, start working with us in early January. And Darren, when did you say you started?

Darren Asper:

I remember when LeRoy had those initial meetings that fall, he gave me, you know, some background information that you might have given LeRoy at one of those meetings about the trail and, you know, came down the hall and said, "What do you know about trails? What can we do here?" And I jumped right into it. So, I know it was probably by January I was involved in the project.

Avigail Oren:

Well, I want to ask you a little bit more about- so, you say you jumped right into it. What had prepared you in your past, like, in your career or in your life that made you feel like really passionate about this project or really ready to tackle it?

Darren Asper:

Yeah, I think for me, as Linda talked about, we're not a strict lobbying firm. We do lobbying, but a lot of people in our company are planners and my background is in urban planning. I'm a certified planner. So, I saw the value of rail

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trails and open space for communities. And so, you know, this project really resonated with me, it resonated with others in our company in terms of wanting to see it happen. And like what Linda said – the timing was perfect. You know, we don't have that legislative power today for trails. And, you know, it was at a time that was critical because today, I think, people across the Commonwealth, even very conservative county commissioners in Tioga County, they see the value of trails. But back then, it was still being concerned. People were concerned about crime, they're being concerned- people were concerned about crime, they were concerned about property rights, and some of those issues associated with trying to build a trail in the community. So, this project really was the opportunity to, as Linda would talk about, building the interstate that everybody can have access to. So, that's what made it exciting.

Avigail Oren:

Yeah. So, as you recall, what was the ATA's ask? What was your understanding of their situation and what you were hired to help with?

Darren Asper:

Yeah, so as I recall, and I was looking back at some old notes and some materials we had put together. We went through with each trail group, and that was six different trail groups, and what their cost estimates were for their unfinished segments. And some trail groups had a better understanding of it than others. We asked them to prioritize it. We had a map that showed initially what were the priority segments and what we thought were the different sources of funding that could secure it. And as I recall, the original ask at the federal level, through the transportation bill that was running, which was it was TEA-21. The original request was \$12 million for a line item of which the trail end up getting \$6 million, which was still an incredible amount for a trail project for line items in that bill, in that act.

Linda Boxx:

So, and I'll add to that a little bit, Avigail. So, LeRoy picked me up. We drove to Washington, DC. We had an early meeting with Anne Ebbert. We made the rounds around the Capitol – went to see- Jack Murtha wasn't in but talked to his Chief of Staff. Went to, I think Santorum's office, went to...

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- Darren Asper:** Probably Specter, Senator Specter.
- Linda Boxx:** Specter's office, yeah. And, you know, had all of 15 minutes to present the case, and, you know, try to get them on board. And that was a real eye-opener for me because I realized that, you know, in front of me and behind me for, you know, every 15-minute increment, you know, by how many staff people throughout the whole day – people were there asking for money, everybody was asking for money. That's why people went to, you know, made the pilgrimage to Washington, DC was to ask their congressmen or senators for something. And I just thought, like, "Oh, well, this is going to be- this is difficult." But because of Delta's relationships with the congressional members and especially with the infrastructure work that, you know, you all did and your relationship with Bud Shuster, you know, we were able to get that initial \$12 million line item in the TEA-21 bill.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah, actually, I want to kind of back up and, like, dive into each of these moments in a little bit more detail. So, Delta basically, you know, hits the ground running in January of 1998, correct? And TEA-21 is enacted in July.
- [Chuckle]
- So, it's a pretty tight window. So, what was it like going to all of these trail groups? Were you hopping in the car with these, like, focus groups, town halls, or were they intimate, small meetings with just a few board members? What did the process look like on it on a nitty-gritty level?
- Darren Asper:** Yeah, I think it was a little bit of all the above. There were some groups- I can remember going to the Georgian Inn and talking to the Somerset group and talking to them about their projects. I can also remember going to the Montour Trail Council and there was a much larger group, there's a lot of interest, you know, in terms of what was going on and what the priorities were. So, yeah, we met with each trail group to help identify what their priorities were. But I would say it was the strength of the Allegheny Trail Alliance board that would then, you know, every month sometimes more than once a month as we were doing this kind of keep everyone together,

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you know, we wouldn't go down rabbit trails. I think there were some groups that wanted to add maybe spur trails on to this interstate and we're like, "No, we got to focus on the main line." So, it was a little bit of everything. But at the end of the day, it was the strength of the board, the ATA board that helped keep it together and focused and prioritize and get along.

Avigail Oren: Were there any people or characters that you remember particularly vividly from this process?

Darren Asper: Yeah, I can remember I enjoyed- I mean, there's so many. I enjoyed the Montour Trail Council and Dick Quasi and Marshall Faussold and, you know, as they would go through their list and challenges they had with some of their tunnels and overpasses and enjoyed Hank Parke from Somerset that would help us with, you know, help us in terms of bringing that group together and the county commissioners. I also got to meet Eileen Melvin, who is from Somerset County, who was a bigger player with the Republican party at the time at the state and, you know, started working relationship with her through this. So, there are a lot of just great people. I mean, volunteers that were salt of the earth people and also people who enjoyed walking and riding bikes on trails that, you know, we're good at lobbying in their own right and had connections, which really helped.

Avigail Oren: Yeah, so you would come back from these meetings. How did you process all of that information? Were you taking notes in a giant notebook? Did you have one of these, like, crime scenes with strings all over kind of corkboard or was it mostly you sitting down with a team and talking through what you've learned? What were you guys doing that wasn't visible to the trail builders but, you know, was really essential to getting this done?

Darren Asper: Yeah, so what we would do is, I think, behind the scenes, so to speak – we would put a lot of this information in Excel spreadsheets because we had to show the cost of the project of the trail segment and how it would be funded, whether it's through the federal requests that we were asking for or it might have been through some state funding or some foundational

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support. I mean, there was a lot of- I like your illustration, Avigail, about the crime scene. It was almost like taking a spreadsheet and trying to piece everything together. You'd find out about a source of funding that you would secure and maybe it wasn't the complete amount that you requested. So, then you had to go back and kind of piece things together. So, at the end of the day though, usually when we put together a message statement that we would share with state and federal officials – the drafts were shared with Linda, maybe some other key people to say, “Yeah, this is the message we want to promote. This is what we have to push in terms of the trail and what’s moving forward.”

Avigail Oren: Yeah, explain to me what a message sheet is. I'm not familiar with it. And we want to make sure that people reading this a hundred years in the future, you know, can get a picture of what this document would have looked like.

Darren Asper: Yeah, so a message statement- and Linda talked about the 15-minute meeting. So, you can't go into a meeting with a congressional office with a book.

Avigail Oren: Yeah

Darren Asper: Because you have 15 minutes and the attention span, especially nowadays, is probably about a minute. So, what you have, which we did, was just a brief, bound booklet that showed the map of the ATA, what the completed/uncompleted segments were, a spreadsheet that showed each individual trail costs and, you know, when it was anticipated to be completed if they had the funding. We also showed how the match was in place – if and when the federal funding came through, and how everything was matched. And then economic impact – number of visitors, number of businesses that were impacted by this. And back in '97 and '98, that was- I don't want to say it was shooting in the dark, but we just didn't have as good of information. Like, I looked at the Great Allegheny Passage website the other day and I was pleased to see, like, every two years, I think, or three years – you're doing an update to the economic impact and visitation. And we have so much good information now about trail users and businesses on trails. So, we were trying to estimate that to

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provide this to a congressional audience, which at the time, a lot of them didn't ride bikes, didn't really know a lot about rail trails. So, it was all new. But we knew we had to make it concise for the staff and for people to understand that it was a good investment in terms of putting federal money into the trail.

Avigail Oren: Linda, did you want to add something?

Linda Boxx: Well, I think the other thing that Delta did so well and as Darren was talking about those early meetings, if I remember those correctly, they were done over a period of three days that we went on this, you know, tour, really compressed. And the message was, you know, "Tell us what you need. We need to have that understanding. But you as trail people we need to get- you need to get letters of support from county commissioners, your township supervisors, businesses. We need to accumulate all these letters in a very quick way so that we can show that there really is broad base support."

Avigail Oren: That this can I keep going back to hit the ground running, but you know, that this isn't a lark.

Linda Boxx: Exactly, exactly. And Avigail, you said it exactly right. I mean, from January and whenever the dates were that we went-made our trips to Washington, DC and then to get the bill passed, you know, in early summer – that was a phenomenally compressed timetable. And I think- and again, I'm sorry LeRoy is not here. But I think LeRoy conveyed to me, I believe, that after the meeting, Anne Ebbert, you know, told him, "LeRoy, this is the last, you know, this is the last high priority project that you can put into this bill, you know, no more. This will be the last one."

Avigail Oren: Well, that's actually a good segue to my next question, which is, you know, at that point, Delta had been around for a decade. You clearly had a lot of experience. But I'd like to hear you talk a little bit more about that. Like, how normal or exceptional was this in the scheme of what you were doing on other projects? Like, were you guys driving down to Washington every week or was this out of the ordinary? Were you, like, putting- doing a new message sheet every day? Or,

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you know, I guess I want to get a sense for, like, how this fit into the broader spectrum of your work.

Darren Asper:

I mean, it was definitely for our company, a high-priority project. It was a high-priority initiative. We knew as a company how important this was, you know, for us as a company and for the Commonwealth. So, it wasn't that we were in DC, like, every week, but the communications were daily because another component of all this was, we worked very closely with Anne Ebbert. She was a federal lobbyist. And she was very successful with transportation projects. So, I worked a lot with her and then her key staff person, Julie Klopecki, who was really behind a lot of this on this project. In fact, I'm still working with Julie. I talked to her about this the other day and we were kind of going down memory lane about, you know, the daily calls, the three times a day call, "Hey, this is what's going on with the legislation. You need to have this person call and weigh in." So, not so much us being in DC every day. But definitely, the communications on the phone were constant and also back to Linda and some of the others with the ATA – it was constant.

Avigail Oren:

Yeah, actually didn't occur to me initially to ask this, but with legislation constantly in flux as it's being debated in committee and moving to the floor and how... So, Anne and her staff were calling you guys with these constant updates saying, "Now, it looks like a slimmer chance or a greater chance," or was it more like the bar has been raised? You need to do... What were those conversations? What kind of information were they transmitting?

Darren Asper:

Well, the information would be basically the timing, the timing of passing the legislation.

Avigail Oren:

Okay.

Darren Asper:

Like, maybe they thought it was going to be at one point in time, it might have slipped a little bit. Fortunately, it didn't slip too much in terms of timing compared to other pieces of legislation I've worked on. But that communication was going on. And, you know, initially, we had requested \$12 million, and they told us, "Well, you're going to get six." So, we had to go

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back to Linda and talk to her about that. Now, that was a little disappointing but, you know, with these projects in that time period with the finite appropriations, that was still a good day – \$6 million was a good day in terms of the line item project.

Linda Boxx: So, Darren, if you remember, and I think you were the one who told me I was driving my car somewhere and with my old bag phone, I'm sure. And you called early in the day and you said, "Well, everybody took a 25% haircut."

[Chuckle]

"Everyone across the board, and so we're down to \$9 million." And I'm like, "What do you mean \$9 million?" And then you called later – I think that it was that same day or very, you know, close to it, and said that we were down to \$6 million. And I was like, "Oh, you're killing me, you know, we just lost \$6 million."

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: But you said, "You still have \$6 million," you know.

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: Definitely put the, you know, the bright side on. And then there was some concern about the bill not passing. And then when it finally did pass, I thought like, "Oh, I guess I'll be happy with \$6 million."

Darren Asper: Yeah, I'll never forget taking, like, the legislative language highlighting it. And, of course, you know, we couldn't, like, PDF it back then or, you know, send it over any sort of social media. So, I faxed it to Linda. You know, I sent it by email just to let her know, "Yes, we have the language. It's in there. It's been approved at \$6 million." So, that was a good day. And we knew, okay, it was \$6 million. It wasn't 9, it wasn't 12. So, now, we got to work on a state strategy and work with our friends and DCNR and Office of the Budget to get- to fill in the gaps and figure it out.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. Well, why don't you talk about that? So, you know, you've got that \$6 million secured, you get a good night's sleep and then what's the next step?

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Darren Asper:

Well, yeah. The next step was then to go back and I'm recalling all this – it was a go back and work with the ATA with the \$6 million and really have a good understanding of how are we going to use that \$6 million and what projects were truly ready to go as the priority. And then it was working with PennDOT – PennDOT had this great program and part of what the beauty was of TEA-21 was it provided a lot of programmatic funding for PennDOT to do what they call “transportation enhancement projects,” which could be trail projects. So, we put together a request, I believe, that was about \$4.2 million in the first round of the Transportation Enhancement Program. So, then we had to go and work with the state because one of the challenges of working with grant funding is how do you match funds? How do you match state and federal funds to- with local or foundational funding, and when you work in that world, every funding program speaks a different language in terms of what they qualify as match or not. So, one of the things we were able to secure was at the time, the Deputy Secretary of PennDOT that oversaw this was Larry King. And Larry produced this letter that basically said that you can take the whole trail in Pennsylvania and any trail segment along there were there's federal transportation dollars, any other non-transportation dollars spent on the trail to be used as match to meet your, I think, was 80/20 split. And that was big because one of the key projects that we had in the trail project or the overall system was the Big Savage Tunnel. And so, that was funded with state dollars and that was a substantial project which could be used to match a lot of the other projects along the trail corridor.

Avigail Oren:

Yeah, so this is something, you know, that as we've been writing these histories, is kind of confusing, you know? It makes sense sort of in the moment it's explained and then as you start to write it down, it's like, wait, from where?

[Chuckle]

So, the most of Big Savage's money comes from DCNR's capital budget from a line item that [inaudible 0:33:01.7] ...

[Crosstalk]

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- Darren Asper:** Yes.
- Avigail Oren:** ...put in after a meeting with Linda in 1996. And then that gets built and later, like the Hot Metal Bridge, for example, is one of these projects that is able to sort of use this global match.
- Darren Asper:** Mm-hmm.
- Avigail Oren:** So, it's that the state funding in the tunnel is essentially allowing all federal money to be used on any other project?
- Darren Asper:** Yeah, I'll start with that. And if I don't get my numbers quite right, Linda can help with me. So, the Big Savage Tunnel – it was, as you said, was funded by the DCNR line item in the state capital budget, okay?
- Avigail Oren:** Mm-hmm.
- Darren Asper:** And I believe that they estimated that the cost of the tunnel would be, what, \$6 million originally, Linda?
- Linda Boxx:** Well, yes, yeah.
- [Chuckle]
- It went up.
- Darren Asper:** It went up.
- Linda Boxx:** Darren, we had two line items in that capital budget, of 1997 capital budget. One was for \$6 million for the Big Savage Tunnel. And the other one was \$10 million to, you know, to do the trail. And we ended up only accessing, you know, the \$10 million using it for Big Savage Tunnel and then the five miles from Confluence to...
- Avigail Oren:** Fort Hill.
- Linda Boxx:** ...Harnedsville or wherever, out that way.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah. So, the cost of that project, Big Savage, actually helped in terms of match to a lot of the other projects along the trail corridor. And that was recognized by PennDOT. I remember the letter we got from Larry King saying such and such, you know, out, you can match across the board. And I had to show that letter a few times, especially with some PennDOT district

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offices. There were some offices that were a little bit more difficult to work with than others. But that was extremely helpful putting it together.

Avigail Oren: So, basically, you would come to one of the district offices and say, you know, "We're going to take 80% of the federal money and our match comes from this 20% from Big Savage of state money." And they would argue with you and you would pull out this letter and say, "I have it on good authority."

Darren Asper: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, sometimes I would involve from our end, calling Larry King to have the person who was at that district office reminded that that was the way it was going to be. But we had some good people at PennDOT Central that wanted to see this project into fruition. The project manager for the Transportation Enhancements Program at the time – I can't remember his last name, Linda. It was Lou. Remember who that was – Lou? Saying that right?

Linda Boxx: I'll think of it.

Darren Asper: Yeah, I'll think of it, too. But he was an advocate. So, there were so many- as Linda said before, the timing for this was perfect because there are so many advocates at DCNR at PennDOT, from the top through Central office and some of the district offices all the way you know, down the line.

[Crosstalk]

Linda Boxx: Dana Accurti...

Darren Asper: Yeah, she was involved.

Linda Boxx: Dana Accurti was very important for us. He was sort of- I almost went up our secret weapons in a way.

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: Was it Lou Schulz?

Darren Asper: Lou Schulz. That's who it was. Yeah, yeah.

Avigail Oren: Great.

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- Linda Boxx:** Avigail, so what would happen is that 80/20 but actually in a project and we'll take the Hot Metal Bridge as an example – that was basically 100% federally-funded.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** Right.
- Linda Boxx:** But we could use all that federal money because there was a match somewhere else. So, that was the real glory of it that we weren't, you know, using the money from Big Savage wasn't actually going to Hot Metal Bridge, the match requirement was if that makes sense.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** You were using, like, a combination of...
- Linda Boxx:** No, it was 100% federal money. Like, we were able to use 100% federal money because the match requirement was satisfied somewhere else in the transportation system.
- Avigail Oren:** So, you didn't have to put that 20%, like, towards the bridge at all...
- [Crosstalk]
- Linda Boxx:** Exactly.
- Avigail Oren:** It was only one federal grant that paid for the entire bridge?
- Linda Boxx:** No, there were many federal grants but what...
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Linda Boxx:** The bottom line is, and I think Darren, you all and we've got this emphasized to us over and over.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah.
- Linda Boxx:** At the end of the day, as long as when the trail was built, there was, you know, no more than 80% of federal funding used. We were good. And, "Linda, if you don't want to go to prison, you need to keep very good records."

[Chuckle]

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- Darren Asper:** Yeah. And we did.
- Linda Boxx:** “You will be audited, you will be audited,” you know.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah, but there were some really- there was a lot of flexibility at the PennDOT level. I remember, I think it was Lou Schulz old saying, “Darren, you can include, as match, the state prevailing wage for a non-skilled employee and the volunteers that helped build the trail if you if your trail groups can calculate that and put a number to it, yeah, you can count as match.”
- Linda Boxx:** Right.
- Darren Asper:** So, that was just something that, you know, I really haven't had on other projects. There hasn't been that level of flexibility. But to Linda's point, like, if you take a \$1 million, let's say, piece of trail – ordinarily, if you were applying for Transportation Enhancement Program, there be \$800,000 you'd get from state \$200,000 you'd have to figure out, you know, where that was coming from that's not federal. And in this case, that wasn't the case. You know, we had the match as long as at the end of the day that it was 80/20, everybody was okay.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, like, yeah, again, to go back to Hot Metal Bridge – you know, even if at the point when the bridge was done, it was 17% and 83% that as long as by the time the whole thing was done, it evened out. It was fine.
- Darren Asper:** Yes.
- Linda Boxx:** Yes. I want to say that Hot Metal Bridge was almost all federally-funded.
- Avigail Oren:** Right.
- Linda Boxx:** There were about five different- I think there were one or two ISTEA grants and TEA-21, CMaT grant. You know, there were lots of different federal dollars that came in from different sources, but it was almost- the construction of the bridge was almost all federally-funded.

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- Avigail Oren:** Mm-hmm. And that was all procured by the City of Pittsburgh? Like, or did the ATA procure some of those five?
- Linda Boxx:** We procured a little bit. We raised some private funding to help demolish, you know, a bridge section before the project even started.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Linda Boxx:** And I think- I mean, the URA did most of the fancy fundraising on that one.
- Avigail Oren:** Got it. Okay. So, one question- another question of clarification that came up as we've been doing some of this writing is why for those two-seat capital budget line items – John Oliver basically said, you know, “It's okay, you can spend it.” But why did you have to keep going back to the governor's office to get it released?
- Darren Asper:** You know, Linda maybe can help with this a little bit. I want to say that part of it in getting released was with the state capital budget funding is a political process. So, that's part of it. The other thing, too, wasn't it because for the Big Savage Tunnel, the project kept- the price tag kept going up. Was that part of it, Linda?
- Linda Boxx:** Yes, absolutely. I mean, Avigail asked me if this was in John Oliver's control because it was his capital budget. Why did we have to do the heavy lifting in terms of crawling back to the governor and begging for another release? And I just think that's just the way it was. But that's, you know, maybe that's a question we'd have to ask John Oliver.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah. And I'm recalling, too – once they got the money from the DCNR portion of the budget, didn't it become a Department of General Services project?
- Linda Boxx:** Well, yes.
- Darren Asper:** Yeah. So, then that's just changing departments and additional communication required...
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Darren Asper:** ...you know, bringing people up to speed for that.

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Avigail Oren: Okay. So, I want to ask how you got that meeting with Bud Shuster in DC as part of the process of getting the TEA-21 line item?

Darren Asper: Yeah, I think we understood because of Congressman Shuster's position as Chair of the Transportation Committee that oversees this whole thing and putting it together that we wanted to meet with him in person. And it was really through the efforts- LeRoy Kline had a great relationship with Bud Shuster and working with Anne Ebbert and Julie Klopecki – they had great relationship with Bud Shuster and his staff. He had a pretty extensive staff. That was not only his staff from his congressional office but also the Transportation Committee staff. And so, through that – that's how we were able to get the meeting. And as I recall that meeting, we had a little video, showed him the benefits of the trail that Linda and the ATA put together and he was watching the video and, you know, he was supportive. So, it was a great day. Yeah, it was a great day having him plugged into this.

Avigail Oren: Yeah, you remember that too, Linda?

Linda Boxx: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

[Chuckle]

And he knew my dad, too. I don't know if I mentioned that before but Kennametal had a plant in Bedford and dad had been supportive of Bud, you know, of course, when he was alive. But we made that connection, too, which is always helpful.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. So, one question I have is what... So, say this, like, how did it happen in the ATA had kind of never gotten connected with Delta Development and had tried to orchestrate this alone, which I think Linda would say is, you know, would have been...

[Laughter]

Linda Boxx: Wouldn't have happened.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. But from your perspective, having done this work now for over 20 years, you know, what is it that Delta Development

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is able to do and bring to the table because of the wealth of experience of you and all of your associates? And, yeah, like, is it about, like, making things go faster facilitating connections? Those kinds of things I'm curious to hear your perspective on.

Darren Asper:

I think our difference as a company is there are a lot of lobbying firms out there. And there are a lot of lobbying firms that will take you to meetings. They'll take you to meetings in Harrisburg. And, you know, they'll show you around the halls of Harrisburg or Washington DC. That's not really how we approach lobbying. We do kind of, you know, project-oriented purpose lobbying for infrastructure projects. So, in that case, what you do is you mobilize pretty quickly and you get your message statement put together, get the information to the key people you're meeting with at the congressional office, and oftentimes, it's more important to meet with their staff because they really help guide the decisions. So, I think it's the strategy of being mobilized and having a plan in terms of pretty quick meetings and rolling out the strategy. So, everybody understands, like on one page, what the strategy is, what the cost is, how it's going to be matched, what's the impact? So, no one is caught off guard. And I think that's been the difference. You know, with ATA and every other project I've worked on over the last 24 years is just being focused. We're not really an issues-oriented lobbying firm. We're a project-focused lobbying firm. And for what the ATA needed, that was perfect, you know, because that's how we're oriented.

Avigail Oren:

Yeah. And what value have you found in having a planning background, you know, when you come to these kinds of projects? Do you feel like you understand the engineering needs better or the local municipal government processes or...?

Darren Asper:

Yeah, I think what helped in terms of being a planner in this process is the value of community asset like this and being able to communicate that economic impact is vitally important how you try to describe that for a project like this can be a little challenging. And also understanding, like you said, the municipal aspect – how do you get the people supportive and behind the project? So, it's not only getting their letter of

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support but making sure they're communicated with so no one kind of goes off in their own direction. It's like herding cats. You got to keep people together. Planners are good at that, you know, through their public processes, they kind of keep focused and going into one direction.

Avigail Oren:

Yeah. That does strike me as very different from a more typical lobbying firm, just the level of expertise that you guys have with sort of the grounded parts of the project, not just the relational parts. So, have you worked on trail projects since the GAP and if so, what lessons did you take out of the experience working on the GAP? Or even not- what experience, what lessons have just informed other non-trail projects?

Darren Asper:

Yeah, we have worked on a lot of trail projects. We- and Linda was involved in this right after the Great Allegheny Passage, the Greene Trail, down in Greene County - worked on that project. And that's a successful project. The one we're working on now that is taking a lot of focus and I think will be pretty exciting is we have a three-county coalition that's trying to get a Federal BUILD Grant, which is a competitive program through the Department of Transportation. But it all started with Tioga County, and Tioga County – you think of a kind of a rural county, not real forward-thinking, but these guys are very forward-thinking. And they're blessed with also some Marcellus Shale Impact Fee funding. So, they're doing a lot of community projects. And they also have the, oh, I'm losing my thought here- the Grand Canyon, the trail that runs through there...

Linda Boxx:

Pine Creek.

Darren Asper:

Pine Creek Trail, thank you, lost my thought for a second. So, the Pine Creek Trail comes and its termination point is, like, two miles outside of Wellsboro. And the county commissioners in the community – they're determined to get that final two miles into the community because they see the benefit of the trail. It's like one of the most important projects in their county. And getting that final two miles into the community is going to get a lot more people into their community when they ride the trail. Well, we started that effort last year. And now, Clinton

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County is involved because when you go down the trail, down Pine Creek, you can connect through the Susquehanna over to Lock Haven and there's a section of trail they want to get done. So, they're contributing, they're part of it. And then, of course, Lycoming County wants to eventually get their section connected into the borough of Jersey Shore. So, the lessons learned and the advantages I learned from working with the ATA is I can go into a meeting and say, "Hey, did you ever hear of the Great Allegheny Passage?"

[Chuckle]

Like, "Yeah, I rode that last summer. Oh, boy, that's great." "Well, yeah, we were involved in that. We helped secure funding for it. And this is how they did it. This is how they were focused in bringing it in." And, you know, not to say that makes you a rock star, but you're kind of a legend, you know, in the trail world, when you say you're involved in that. And it is kind of funny – I go to- my kids swim and I go to swim meets from time to time and I'll see people wearing, you know, Great Allegheny Passage trail shirts, you know, biking shirts, and I'll go up to them and have a good conversation about it. So, it just gave us as a company a lot of credibility. And like, "Hey, we've been here before," you know, "We were doing trails before they were really cool."

Avigail Oren: Right.

Darren Asper: And what I've been able to see in the process is people that I know 20 years ago would not have been big advocates of trail projects are now like our biggest advocates. And that to me is rewarding. So, yeah, that's what I learned through the process.

Avigail Oren: Yeah, it's so interesting, actually, the consistency of that response from people that...

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: ...you know, its legacy is being the first and the proof of concept. Yeah, Linda, did you- was there anything that I didn't ask that you wanted to jump in?

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Linda Boxx: No. I mean, there are great, I'll say, interpersonal stories about LeRoy because he was, you know, I think I said this to you before, Avigail. I was like, you know, holding a tiger by the tail trying to keep up with everything that was going on. And, you know, LeRoy was always just so- he was firm but joyful. And it was always good to work with him. And please, Darren, tell him he, you know, I'll come see him at some point.

Darren Asper: Yeah, I'll tell him to call in. I mean, with everything that's going on, you know, he's busy working with clients, but I will let him know to give you a call and set up a separate...

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: Well, I think you did a great job of really telling Delta Development's role. One thing, Darren, that you did so well and you mentioned the spreadsheets earlier, but you kept those funding spreadsheets up to date. And as things changed, you would make those changes. And, you know, I have a stack, you know, two inches thick of all those monthly spreadsheets that you used to give to us. That helped really keep the trail groups, like, focused on what they were supposed to be doing. And if there was a slippage an obstacle somewhere along the line, you know, it didn't fester. It was brought to, you know, brought to the forefront very quickly. And it kept us moving very, very well.

Darren Asper: Yeah, I appreciate that, Linda. I can remember those spreadsheets and after generating maybe, like, the tenth one, I remember getting a phone call from Linda, like, "Need to time date stamp these. We're getting too many versions."

[Chuckle]

And so, yeah, there's probably at least like 35 versions out there or more. We have to keep them focused.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. I don't know how you did this before Google Sheets.

[Chuckle]

The idea of having to send a new version every time they're updated – it makes my millennial brain explode.

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Darren Asper: Yeah, I mean, we were doing this just when a lot of people were getting individual email accounts. And I don't think we had PDFs. So, you're faxing things, you know, email attachments really weren't that great at the time. So, yeah, I mean, it wasn't like we were using typewriters. But it was back in the early days.

Avigail Oren: Right. I mean, I think it just speaks all the more to how impressive it is that you were able to get this done in six months...

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: ...when you're, like, sitting waiting for the fax machine to go [mimicking fax machine], you know?

[Chuckle]

Darren Asper: Yeah, yep. Yeah.

Avigail Oren: Nowadays, you would pop it into a Google Sheets and just go [mimicking computer], you know? You could highlight it and show that it was a new change. So, I think it's a really remarkable achievement.

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: So, all right. So, I'm going to stop the recording.

Darren Asper: Okay.

[End Audio 1]

[0:57:18.1]

[Begin Audio 2]

Avigail Oren: It is Thursday, March 19th at 2:30. We are re-beginning the recording to have a brief conversation about Representative Rick Geist and Delta Development Group's experience working with him.

Darren Asper: Yeah, and I'm glad we brought this up. So, Representative Rick Geist – we had worked with him on a lot of projects in the Altoona area in his district. And, of course, he is a big bike and trail advocate. So, all along, he was very involved at the state

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level helping the ATA, helping us, letting us know who we needed to work with, hey, you know, he would say, "Hey, I'll follow up with Secretary Oliver or the governor." So, he was critical. I mean, he followed up with us a lot on the initiatives at the state level and definitely an advocate. And again, that region of the state – Congressman Murtha, Congressman Shuster, the senators and also Representative Geist, and also the governor – it was a perfect alignment of people that wanted to do a trail project like this. So...

Linda Boxx: Darren, you had mentioned when the TEA-21 bill was passed and you'd mentioned the \$4.3 million appeal – there had been and it was actually \$4.3 million that was awarded through the Transportation Enhancement Advisory Committee...

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: ...you know, that Rick chaired as...

Darren Asper: That's right.

Linda Boxx: Yeah. And so, in addition to the individual, you know, Somerset County may have gone after \$1.8, Regional Trail Corporation might have gone after, you know, everyone was going after different pieces. There was also that sort of statewide, high priority TEAC award. And I never really knew and this is one of the things Avigail tried to ask Rick, but Rick didn't really answer very directly. You know, how did that come about? You know, and was Delta involved in that at all?

Darren Asper: Yeah. So, and I'm glad you brought this up, Linda, because it's bringing back memories. So, at the time with the Transportation Enhancement Program, I think Pennsylvania through TEA-21 got over- I want to say it was well over \$40 million of transportation enhancement funds. And so, it used to be that every regional planning organization had prioritized their projects. So, the SPC – they prioritized theirs, Southern Allegheny's, etc. Well, we realized at that time that they also had a statewide committee that would fund additional dollars or more money for projects of additional state significance. So, Representative Geist was on that committee and we also knew others who were on that committee either representing elected officials or elected officials themselves. And I can

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remember going over to Harrisburg and meeting with each one, whether they're Republican or Democrat – they were on this committee talking to them about the trail. And it was really through Representative Geist's efforts that he kind of kept that group together and advocated for the Great Allegheny Passage as a premier project that needed to be supported at the state level. And it kind of broke the rules because as an aside – after the ATA got that funding, they disbanded the statewide committee and just put it back on the local level. So, again, timing was everything with this project.

Linda Boxx: Who else? Do you know if anybody else got money out of that TEAC pot?

Darren Asper: Other projects – you know, I can't remember of any offhand.

Linda Boxx: But nobody got \$4.3 million?

Darren Asper: No, no. I mean, by far, it was the largest project awarded. There might have been some other statewide projects got a million or two, kind of the typical Philadelphia or Pittsburgh-type projects, but not to a level what the ATA did.

Avigail Oren: And you attribute that to Geist's passion for the project?

Darren Asper: Absolutely.

Avigail Oren: He was the driver there?

Darren Asper: He was the driver, you know, at the state level.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And you think that his doing that was the death knell for that funding mechanism or the organization of the committee?

Darren Asper: Well, let's just put it this way – it was the statewide awarding of transportation enhancements projects was changed after that. It was more decentralized. Probably because some people thought that they weren't getting their fair share. So, that might be the nice way of saying it.

Avigail Oren: Very diplomatic.

[Chuckle]

Darren Asper: Yeah.

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Avigail Oren: All right.

Linda Boxx: Well, that might- Avigail, that might shed some light on what Rick said in his interview with you about other people coming to him and wondering, you know, how we got so much- ATA got so much money and why weren't they getting any money or, you know, words to that effect.

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: And that might have really referred to that TEAC funding?

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Darren Asper: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: I think one of the problems with the interview is that anything could refer to anything if you cut it up and rearranged it. He's a very experienced politician.

Darren Asper: Yeah, he is. Wow.

Avigail Oren: It could or not, we'll never know.

[Chuckle]

But this was very helpful, you know, for me. It's always a necessity to have, you know, corroboration. And so, to have Linda's memory, your memory, and Geist's memory align, you know, really strengthens that narrative.

Darren Asper: Good. Well, I appreciate it. I appreciate the opportunity to participate and being a part of history here. So, it's good.

Avigail Oren: Indeed

Linda Boxx: Thank you, Darren.

Darren Asper: Thank you.

[End Audio 2]

[0:07:01.9]

[End Interview]

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