

RICK GEIST INTERVIEW

Avigail Oren: I'm going to put them right under you because it'll definitely catch my voice. It struggles a little more with lower voices. Okay. It is Monday, June 17th, 2019. This is Avigail Oren and I'm here interviewing Rick Geist at Mama Randazzo's restaurant in Altoona, Pennsylvania. It is about 1:30 p.m. Today in this interview, we're going to focus on how you became the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, as a Pennsylvania state representative, and how in that position, you helped authorize funding for the construction of the GAP Trail in the late 1990s. So, why don't you begin by telling me how you came to run for office in 1978? What prepared you to do that and what motivated you to seek election to the House of Representatives in the 79th district?

Rick Geist: In 1978, there were a group of people from Western Pennsylvania from Elsie Holman and all the way down the pecking orders, including Linda Boxx's father. We were backing a guy named Dick Thornburgh and they wanted to get control of the House of Representatives. And, a group called Pennsylvania's Prospective Government recruited me to run for the State House. I never set out to run for it. I was in a motel room in Beckley, West Virginia writing a proposal for Allied Chemicals, Cement Solvay and the president of our company called. He was on the pay group. He said, "We really want you to run for State House." I said, "I have no interest in that." But, they said, "Well, you got to do it. You got to build highways and all this stuff." I said, "Okay." So, came home, talked it over with my wife and my father-by-law. And, next thing I know, I'm a candidate. And, I knocked on 10,800 doors when people were home and 1,800 when they weren't. And, got very lucky and won by a little over 400 votes. My first term.

Avigail Oren: And, you were telling me before we started recording that you joined the House Transportation Committee right away. How did that come to pass?

Rick Geist: I was in the consulting industry and transportation and the powers to be wanted me on a Transportation Committee. It's the most sought-after committee in the House.

Avigail Oren: For what reason?

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Rick Geist: Because you can bring projects up. So, as a freshman, I got it. And, the chairman was a guy named Rudy Dininni, a great guy. Rudy took me under his wing and he was fighting cancer. So, he gave me his vote. And, as a freshman, I was on the State Transportation Commission which all federal and state money has to go through there. So, I mean, he never once told me how to vote by the way. Great guy. That was how it all started.

Avigail Oren: So, tell me a little bit about those early years on that committee. What kind of work were you doing? What kind of projects were you seeing go through?

Rick Geist: It wasn't really what it was all about.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: Dick Thornburgh came into office as a prosecutor. PennDOT had 25,000 employees. They took it down to 12,000. I wrote legislation that would allow consultants to do inspection rather than having guys playing cards at the highway shed. It was a time of radical change. In the department, they put very capable people in as district engineers. They put very capable people in Central Office to run it. I got the pleasure of knowing them all.

Avigail Oren: And, when did you become the chairman of that committee? How many years later?

Rick Geist: My first chairmanship was professional licensure. And then, I went to leadership as caucus chairman, third highest caucus office. And, the next year, which next term – transportation – was opening up and I had enough seniority to go after. So, I got out of leadership and took the chairmanship.

Avigail Oren: And, what year do you think? You can ballpark it.

Rick Geist: Yeah, I think I have to look at it. It'd be probably '93.

Avigail Oren: So, that takes us up to your first meeting with Linda Boxx in April of 1997.

Rick Geist: I'll never forget it.

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Avigail Oren: Well, that was exactly going to be my question. What do you remember of the meeting?

[Chuckle]

Rick Geist: I remember that she made an appointment to come and see me. And, I checked it out to see who she was. And, I was told she was a zealot and a bunch of other stuff. But, what she didn't know was that we had a huge common interest. And, she needed some money and appropriations badly. And, she came in and introduced herself talking to me about that. I said, "Okay." I said, "I know what you need." She said, "Yep." I said, "Okay, it's done." Never anything else. Seriously.

Avigail Oren: So, just be explicit for the record. What was this shared interest?

Rick Geist: Trails and preserving rail right-of-way.

Avigail Oren: And, tell me a little bit about how your interest developed in trails and...

Rick Geist: Well, in all the modalities – from a non-believer and believer in all the modalities and transportation blend together. And, you can't just have highways, which Pennsylvania thought that's all they needed for years. You needed a really good rail freight system. You needed a rail passenger system all linked to highways. You needed airports that had good highway access. Pittsburgh Airport was one of the first really big projects, by the way.

Avigail Oren: That you worked on as transportation?

Rick Geist: Yeah, had over a billion dollars in highways that went to it. So, yeah, I mean, that's was about it. And, we had unbelievable losses in rail right-of-ways in Pennsylvania. What Linda Boxx was done was preserving them. We called them "linear parks." We had all kinds of names that don't exist anymore. But, the guy that thought of Rails to Trails, I wish it was me, but it wasn't.

Avigail Oren: And so, by the time Linda came to meet with you – you really believed that trails were a way to do two things at once. Create pedestrian and cycling...

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Rick Geist: That's right.

Avigail Oren: ...infrastructure?

[Crosstalk]

Rick Geist: Respect. It did a lot of stuff.

Avigail Oren: And, also to protect it.

Rick Geist: Preserving the right-of-way.

Avigail Oren: Preserving the right-of-way. Okay. So, tell me – do you remember how much money she was asking for then?

Rick Geist: I think was under \$10 million, but she got every penny.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And so, Linda has told me that she walks out of that meeting completely elated thinking that, like, not that the check was in the mail, right? But, that she had just gotten all this money. What was the reality of what you did in that meeting for her?

Rick Geist: The reality was we had to go to the governor and we had to go to the all the bureaucrats that controlled the money. We did that, I did that.

Avigail Oren: So, for someone who's not an expert in the inner workings of government – what does it mean going to the governor and the bureaucrats? I mean, how does that work?

Rick Geist: No money in projects can be released without all the people have to check off – state treasurer, governor. We got all the checkboxes. We got her the money.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: I think I put the money in the budget.

Avigail Oren: Yes, it was in the capital- the state capital budget. So, just, you know, for the sake of people who might be listening to this in 100 or 200 years. Why do all of these people need to check off and sign off on it?

Rick Geist: Well, they don't want people cheating and put in their own pockets.

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- Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, it's like an anti-corruption measure?
- Rick Geist:** Yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, how often do- when it's not a case of corruption? It's just a standard, you know, a standard case, does money not get released? Is it common for money not to get released?
- Rick Geist:** Probably 99% of that money never gets released.
- Avigail Oren:** That is a very high amount.
- Rick Geist:** It's a lot of money, but people put projects in knowing they'll never get funded. But, they can take the political credit for it.
- Avigail Oren:** Interesting. Okay. So then, what do you have to do to be the one percent to ensure that...?
- Rick Geist:** You have to understand politics and how it's done. Linda had a very keen understanding of this. And, she used to play dumb, I wouldn't have believed her at all. Never.
- [Chuckle]
- Avigail Oren:** You were wise not to.
- Rick Geist:** Never.
- Avigail Oren:** So, it took- I'm interpreting, when you say, it took an understanding of politics. You knew, you needed to know how to convince the right people or...
- Rick Geist:** Because those right people needed things also.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, I'm assuming that one of the things they needed is campaign contributions or... But, what are some other things that might be needed?
- Rick Geist:** At the level that we were working on – it wasn't about campaign contributions.
- Avigail Oren:** Oh, okay.
- Rick Geist:** It was about "I need a bridge."
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, if they weren't cooperative, the bridge will disappear.

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Avigail Oren: Okay, so it's trading of, "Okay, I will sign off on this, but I need you to sign off on that later," okay. Okay, so that's the story of how the \$60 million gets in the state capital budget.

Rick Geist: Yeah. The other thing that's interesting is who all showed up for the ribbon cutting.

[Chuckle]

Avigail Oren: Tell me about that.

Rick Geist: In other words, people at ribbon cutting...

Avigail Oren: Which ribbon cutting? There weren't very many.

Rick Geist: The very first one I went to.

Avigail Oren: Okay, so was that the Savage Tunnel?

Rick Geist: No, no. That was last.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: It was a piece in the middle of summer.

Avigail Oren: Okay. It's just a trail piece. Okay.

Rick Geist: And, all these people show up. And, I remember saying to my chief of staff, "Remember them? They were in our office bitching about this project."

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: But, that's the nature of things.

Avigail Oren: So...

Rick Geist: Once you get approved and you get money – everybody did it.

Avigail Oren: Okay, okay.

Rick Geist: And, I was always glad to introduce them to big supporters of this project.

Avigail Oren: Mm-hmm. Because you knew that when you wanted something done, they would remember?

Rick Geist: Go back around now.

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Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: They are out in front.

Avigail Oren: Got it. Okay. So later, the GAP Trail was awarded \$4.3 million.

Rick Geist: Yep.

Avigail Oren: Can you tell me this story of how that happened?

Rick Geist: Same, it's basically the same.

Avigail Oren: Okay, so you wrote another \$4.3 into the capital budget?

Rick Geist: Yep.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: And, the governor agreed to it.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: And, we were off and running.

Avigail Oren: So, that was the state capital budget, if I understand it correctly, that's money that's coming from Pennsylvania taxpayers. That's like the state's budget?

Rick Geist: Yes.

Avigail Oren: Okay. So, one of...

Rick Geist: Some of it was liquid fuels.

Avigail Oren: Was what?

Rick Geist: Liquid fuels money, some gas taxes.

Avigail Oren: Okay, from gas taxes. Got it. Okay. So, one thing Linda wanted me to ask you about was the Transportation Enhancement Advisory Committee.

Rick Geist: That's right.

Avigail Oren: So, tell me – what was this committee? And, what was the idea behind it? And, what was its downfall?

[Chuckle]

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Rick Geist: How many hours do you have?

Avigail Oren: Let's do the Reader's Digest version.

[Chuckle]

Rick Geist: That was a way of taking projects and approving them. It was insulation away from protection for the governor's office and others. At the time that we were doing that, we were very, very close to the leadership of PennDOT. We were very close to the budget secretary and the governor. So, we knew how to work the pins and levers of government for us. And, we learned how to use the committee to say no to other people. Was that short?

Avigail Oren: Say that again?

Rick Geist: That was really short.

Avigail Oren: Yes. Maybe we can go into a little more detail. So, what money- was this from the T-21 federal funds?

Rick Geist: We had park monies.

Avigail Oren: It was park monies. Okay, so it was a lot different... Okay.

[Crosstalk]

Rick Geist: Federal money, yeah. Wherever we could scrape it up.

Avigail Oren: Okay. So, it's a big pot. Okay. It's not from any one thing. And...

Rick Geist: Though a lot of people- there were people very jealous of Linda Boxx, for what she got.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: DCNR and other places. And, I know that I had meetings with people that would say, "Well, why is she getting all this money and we aren't?" Which is the greatest compliment you can get against the government. I always say when she's done, **[inaudible 0:15:34.4]**.

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Avigail Oren: Yeah. So, I want to know a little bit more about – you said that this committee was a way of saying no to certain people. What does that...

Rick Geist: Insulation and buffering.

Avigail Oren: Okay, between the governor and local constituents or local officials or both?

Rick Geist: Different groups no matter who they were.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And...

Rick Geist: Most of these people testified in front of the 12-year plans.

Avigail Oren: What- explain what that is.

Rick Geist: Well, the state does a hearing every two years on the 12-year plan for funding at PennDOT.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: And, we were combining DCNR and PennDOT on some of these projects, especially if they were in state parks.

Avigail Oren: So, am I to understand that PennDOT is always planning 12 years out?

Rick Geist: Yes.

Avigail Oren: Fascinating.

Rick Geist: Projects in the first four years usually get built. So, moving a project up...

Avigail Oren: Is a death sentence?

Rick Geist: Is paramount.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: You need to do that.

Avigail Oren: Okay, okay. Oh, right. I had it backwards. Okay. And, how did it work? Because as I understand it, PennDOT has these 12 engineering districts.

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- Rick Geist:** They do.
- Avigail Oren:** So, how did the committee fit in, you know, was this committee allocating evenly into all the districts or...?
- Rick Geist:** Well, the district engineers became critical in our work.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** But, the money came out of Harrisburg. It went to the district engineer. You couldn't give the monies. A lot of times, you couldn't give it to groups, you had to have a government agency accept responsibility. So, all of a sudden, we had district engineers who were not pro trail being very pro trail.
- Avigail Oren:** Interesting, because that was a way to access funding?
- Rick Geist:** There was all kinds of ways. We used every trick in the book.
- Avigail Oren:** And, does that speak- I mean, I'm a little curious about this because I've heard in multiple interviews – people say, “We used every trick in the book.” Was there a sense that you personally had or that was shared, that the rules were too rigid or the bureaucracy...
- Rick Geist:** Oh, we never broke the rules.
- Avigail Oren:** Right, okay.
- Rick Geist:** We just made them work for us.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, was this interpretation needed because the trail was special and different or...?
- Rick Geist:** The trail was special and different, but we were on uncharted country.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, okay.
- Rick Geist:** I mean, we were doing stuff that was never done before.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, that was my question. So, part of the need for the interpretation was that this just- it wasn't that the rules precluded it, it just didn't include it.
- Rick Geist:** Just didn't exist.

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Avigail Oren: Right, okay.

Rick Geist: We actually made it fit.

Avigail Oren: Got it. Okay. And, just to confirm – did the trail ever get money from the Transportation Enhancement Advisory Committee?

Rick Geist: Yes.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And, that is separate from the first authorization and from the \$4.3 million?

Rick Geist: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: Then there's a third?

Rick Geist: Mm-hmm.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And, my question is – why did that third one come from TEAC and not the state capital budget? And, was that just by virtue of the fact that TEAC was new? Or, was it...?

Rick Geist: It all went through one funnel.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: It had to go through the State Transportation Commission and/or the governor's office with the park. A lot of the park money – we sent over the parks from PennDOT.

Avigail Oren: Okay. So essentially, had TEAC existed beforehand, they would have gone through it?

Rick Geist: Mm-hmm.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: How many total dollars we put in that trail? Huge.

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Rick Geist: Maybe \$1 mil.

Avigail Oren: Well, Linda has a spreadsheet. She can tell you.

[Chuckle]

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If you're ever curious. So, what was the ultimate outcome of this committee? Did it last or...

Rick Geist: I don't know whether it's still in existence or not.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: I've been out six years.

Avigail Oren: Right, okay.

Rick Geist: The committee on the 12-year plan, State Transportation Commission has to exist by law.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: PPAC, which is pedestrian, who drives it.

Avigail Oren: Uh-huh.

Rick Geist: I don't know whether it still exists or not.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: It was really active on your Ridge and Schweiker.

Avigail Oren: Okay. All right. So, I want to come back to sort of your personal investment in trail building. Because you talked a little bit about your career, you know, political investment in it. But, I understand that you yourself are a cyclist.

Rick Geist: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: And so, how did that shape what the trail meant to you personally, you know, when you take it outside of your professional life?

Rick Geist: I just thought it was a great way to get people into cycling. And, a lot of people would become road cyclists come off of the trails. And, I was a road cyclist on road trails.

Avigail Oren: Mm-hmm.

Rick Geist: Matter of fact, I enjoyed the road much more than riding trails. But then, after a couple crashes...

Avigail Oren: Crashes have a way of converting you to trail riding.

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Rick Geist: Yes

Avigail Oren: Yes. So, how do you contextualize the GAP Trail within your broader career and life?

Rick Geist: I think it was an amazing accomplishment. I would not believe that anybody thought it was ever going to get done. At one time, I thought Linda Boxx and I were the only two believers and that other people that participated were just there because that was the thing to do – when she was always one or two moves ahead.

Avigail Oren: Mm-hmm.

Rick Geist: You know, it's like hunting deer. And, a person like you is aggressive as you were internally. When you go deer hunting, it's not killing the deer that counts – it's when you get the shot that you know you can kill the deer. After that, it's all mechanical. And, that is one of my descriptions of Linda Boxx. God doesn't give many people the tools that she had in her toolbox or you have. They don't appreciate it because they don't even know it.

[Chuckle]

Avigail Oren: Well, so, I should have asked you this earlier, actually. But, talk a little bit about that opposition. What do you think motivated opposition to the trail...?

Rick Geist: Because people didn't want into all that money.

Avigail Oren: Okay. Is it because they didn't like the idea of the trail or they wanted to use the money for other things?

Rick Geist: They took money away from [inaudible 0:24:02.1] highway projects.

Avigail Oren: From highway projects, okay.

Rick Geist: We called that “the concrete mentality” at PennDOT.

Avigail Oren: The concrete mentality. I love that. And, do you- you know, I'm a historian so I put this in historical context. Do you see this as being really a part of that post-war highway boom that people who are concrete thinkers were so because that was the

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paradigm they came up in? Or, was it really actually that there was still a great need for more road building?

Rick Geist: There were top people in PennDOT who hated the idea, hated losing control. They figured it was their money.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: And, I used to have to remind them, "It's not your money."

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Rick Geist: And, you're just the steward of it.

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Rick Geist: And, this is what we're going to do. And, when you're chairman of the committee, like transportation, they don't fight with you.

Avigail Oren: So, that chairmanship was really valuable.

Rick Geist: Oh, absolutely. Couldn't have done it without it.

Avigail Oren: Really? So, I'm always interested in contingency. If there had been a transportation committee chairperson who- let's not even say was opposed to trail building, was just agnostic.

[Crosstalk]

Rick Geist: [inaudible 0:25:28.7]

Avigail Oren: Right. Do you think this trail could have gotten done?

Rick Geist: Never.

Avigail Oren: Never? Okay.

Rick Geist: It needed champions.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And, when you say it "needed champions," where did it need champions?

Rick Geist: It got Linda Boxx was- when she took over and stepped up. She did it all.

Avigail Oren: Okay. Do you think...

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Rick Geist: There aren't many Joan of Arcs left.

[Crosstalk]

Avigail Oren: Well? I mean, I guess my question is – could this ever have been done from the grassroots level, like, in the sense of it needed political power?

Rick Geist: Absolutely.

Avigail Oren: And, is that...

Rick Geist: There's not an inch of rail in Pennsylvania, there's not an inch of highway, there's not an inch of rail trail that isn't political.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: When people would come bitch about politicians, I used to look at them and say, "Well, how are you going to get this [inaudible 0:26:23.8]?"

Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: We need them.

Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: It's our form of government that works.

Avigail Oren: Right. And so, a question that just occurred to me as you are saying, and that is – I have framed a lot of this conversation around funding because that was what...

Rick Geist: You understand that they see the green.

Avigail Oren: Right. But, how much of this was about policy? How much policy had to be changed?

Rick Geist: We were writing policy as we went.

Avigail Oren: Okay. Tell me a little bit about that. What was the first policy change that needed to be made? Let's even go bigger than the GAP. Like, in order to do trail building.

[Crosstalk]

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- Rick Geist:** Well, that was before Linda Boxx came along. What we were trying to do is write law, that didn't exist, on how to preserve rail right-of-way. I was in that up to my ears.
- Avigail Oren:** And, one thing I'm curious about – I understood that to be federal legislation, but there's an amendment to the- oh, man, why am I blanking on the name of the...
- Rick Geist:** Rail abandonment?
- Avigail Oren:** There's a rail abandonment amendment added to a larger transportation act.
- Rick Geist:** Yeah. Congress was washing their hands of it.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah. So, I guess this is a question about jurisdiction. What's the difference between railbanking, that railbanking amendment being passed and the laws being passed at the state level?
- Rick Geist:** Well, at the state level, we were trying to preserve abandoned right-of-way.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. Which is different than railbanking?
- Rick Geist:** Well, it's railbanking.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** Again, we're talking about a couple-hour lecture here.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah, I know. I'm trying to be, like, scalpel-precise so we can maybe, avoid the full story. So, is it the national amendment makes railbanking illegal, but all of the states have to say that they're for it and have to create legislation in order to do it?
- Rick Geist:** No.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** It's not how it happened.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** The Short Line Rail Association was great for me to work with.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. Short Line Rail?

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Rick Geist: Yeah. They had some awfully good leadership at that time. General Timmons was there for a long time before he went to D.C. In the Class 1 railroads – think about where Pennsylvania was. I used to bus through Louis about being the guy that shut down more railroads than anybody in history.

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Rick Geist: On the eastern railroads, the seven major railroads...

Avigail Oren: Oh, it went through Pennsylvania...

Rick Geist: ...were rolled into Conrail.

Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: So, Conrail had a lot of track they wanted to get rid of.

Avigail Oren: Right, in order to be more efficient.

Rick Geist: Yeah, that's right. They had to make money.

Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: When they got Stanley Crane as the head of Conrail, he was great, great politician. He used to always tell me, "Now Dick, when you're done and in General Assembly, your office is waiting for you in Philadelphia." And, I used to have a Conrail flag on my desk. He said, "You're the only one that flies the flag."

Avigail Oren: But, you never took him up on that offer?

Rick Geist: Well, Conrail is gone and he's dead.

Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: I'm still here.

[Chuckle]

Avigail Oren: Well, It's better than an office. So, this Short Line- so, the Short Line Rail Association advised on how to make this work?

Rick Geist: They saw this as an opportunity to really grow their membership.

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Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: And, they didn't want to lose railroads.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: This was not a very pleasant time in railroad.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. You know, I think you are one of the only people who really know this story very well. So, I think part of the problem and how I'm asking these questions is I'm making the assumption that these abandonments are- or that the law that you're trying to change about abandonments had to do with trails. But now, I'm thinking it was...

Rick Geist: It was a priority...

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: ...who got first shot at buying it.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: If this didn't work then it went to B. If that didn't work, it went to C.

Avigail Oren: I see, okay.

Rick Geist: And, finally, the court of last resort was the state.

Avigail Oren: Was the state? Okay.

Rick Geist: To take over the right-of-way.

Avigail Oren: Okay. So, trails were number one and- or was it like Scenic Railroad was number one?

[Crosstalk]

Rick Geist: [inaudible 0:31:20.9]

Avigail Oren: Okay, what was number one?

Rick Geist: Operating railroad, keep it operating.

Avigail Oren: Keep it operating, then would be...

Rick Geist: Remember, you had shippers long along these lines.

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- Avigail Oren:** What is a shipper?
- Rick Geist:** That's a person that makes stuff and they ship it by rail.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, you mean the actual, the customer at the railway?
- Rick Geist:** Right.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And so, they were also invested in the preservation of these rail lines?
- Rick Geist:** They wanted to keep it, yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, because otherwise, they had to find an alternative which was trucking or I don't know what else.
- Rick Geist:** Well, a little side course here. I believe that every industrial park in Pennsylvania should have a rail siding. An awful lot of industrial parks we built without rail.
- Avigail Oren:** Just for trucking?
- Rick Geist:** Yeah. You couldn't get around Harrisburg and find millions of square feet of warehousing not serviced by railroad. That is really a shame.
- Avigail Oren:** Tell me why you think that's a shame?
- Rick Geist:** Because the cheapest way of shipping freight is by rail.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, it's economic?
- Rick Geist:** It closed the business.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, what makes it cheapest? I think that's my first question. What makes railroad cheap?
- [Crosstalk]
- Rick Geist:** Each boxcar is an equivalent of seven truckloads.
- Avigail Oren:** Oh, so it's just scale?
- Rick Geist:** Scale and service.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, why did rail become less appealing and trucking more appealing then?

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- Rick Geist:** Because the transportation industry and the automobile industry and American Trucking Association were great in getting their stuff passed in Washington.
- Avigail Oren:** So, they were better lobbyists?
- Rick Geist:** Well, yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** They were there to get the National Highway System which was there a railroad built at the expense of railroads.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, the railroads sort of, on the other hand, did not do a good job of advocating?
- Rick Geist:** No. I do that in election, but that's true.
- Avigail Oren:** Say that one more time?
- Rick Geist:** I do that in election.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. All right. So, you said the number one priority was maintaining the active rail lines. Then what would the second-best option be?
- Rick Geist:** Well, it was the county's industrial authorities. We had a whole list.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. Other people essentially taking over the use of the track.
- Rick Geist:** Yes.
- Avigail Oren:** All right. And then, it falls down to Scenic Railroad lines and then it falls down to trails and then it falls down to...
- Rick Geist:** Last [inaudible 0:34:12.0]
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And so, that's the sort of legislation that's getting changed? Okay. And, I forgot where I was coming from on this line of thought. Was I talking about your chairmanship of the committee? Was there any legislation that had to be changed in particular in order to facilitate or allow the trail to get built?
- Rick Geist:** Oh, yeah, absolutely.

RICK GEIST INTERVIEW

- Avigail Oren:** Okay. Tell me about that.
- Rick Geist:** Especially legal liabilities.
- Avigail Oren:** With legal liability? Okay. Yeah, explain that.
- Rick Geist:** The trial lawyers like to make money suing people. And, what we wanted to do was fill these things and keep people, get their hands off them. I always believed that you can have a trail beside a railroad like they do in Europe. Insurance companies and others said you couldn't do it here. My understanding now in certain cases, that's being done – trail beside operator.
- Avigail Oren:** Interesting. Okay. And so, these laws had to make- was it that they were shifting the liability to riders? Were they shifting the liability to...?
- Rick Geist:** Away from people being sued.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, away from the individual. So, no one had liability essentially?
- Rick Geist:** Or, a recreation group or this group, that group.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, right.
- Rick Geist:** Because they didn't have the kind of money to do that.
- Avigail Oren:** To defend, is that right?
- Rick Geist:** Didn't buy insurance policies back then.
- Avigail Oren:** Right, okay.
- Rick Geist:** So, we were doing some really good things. I mean, unbelievably good things. Nobody knew what we were doing.
- Avigail Oren:** As in, nobody around the country knew or nobody in the state knew? Was this, like, on the down low?
- Rick Geist:** We just did it.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, but how then were you getting it passed? Were you just like chucking into other big bills?

[Crosstalk]

RICK GEIST INTERVIEW

Rick Geist: Well, it was amazing how it would show up in a piece of legislation?

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: Nobody even knew it was there.

Avigail Oren: Okay. So, you'd be passing something about healthcare and, like, tucked or...?

Rick Geist: No, it has to be relevant in Pennsylvania.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: Yeah, it was all done legally.

Avigail Oren: Right, okay. So, it would be a different- it would be a bill that was mostly on highway stuff. And then, this would be sort of tucked in.

Rick Geist: And, the trial lawyers weren't smart enough to know where it was going to go.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: Pretty smart people. But, they would leave a lot of the stuff go because it's just rail right-of-way.

Avigail Oren: Okay. Interesting.

Rick Geist: And, we've talked about stuff here in 20 minutes that took days and weeks to get done, yeah.

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Rick Geist: And, we had some really brilliant people working on it.

Avigail Oren: So, this is a question which is... Many, many years ago, I read Robert Caro's biography of Robert Moses.

Rick Geist: Robert Moses and New York City.

Avigail Oren: Yes.

Rick Geist: He was a visionary.

RICK GEIST INTERVIEW

- Avigail Oren:** Yes. But, he was also so successful because he was a master at writing legislation.
- Rick Geist:** That's correct.
- Avigail Oren:** He could manage the tedium and learned it and did it well. And so, I guess my question is, you know, you were in the General Assembly for over 30 years. Do you feel like you also developed, like, a mastery for legislation? Like, do you consider that to be one of your strengths that you brought to the job?
- Rick Geist:** You know, there's guys that can't hit a fastball.
- Avigail Oren:** Right.
- [Chuckle]
- Rick Geist:** There's a lot of guys that get paid a lot of money for doing it.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah.
- Rick Geist:** And, I was very lucky because I had a head that worked that way.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And so...
- Rick Geist:** There's no course that teaches it.
- Avigail Oren:** You just learn it on the job.
- Rick Geist:** Yes. You either learn it or you're gone.
- Avigail Oren:** And so, was this legislation we've just discussed – were you helping write these- whatever clauses that are getting tucked in, these changes?
- Rick Geist:** There was none of it done that didn't have my fingerprints on it.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** Put it that way.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And so, everything passed over your desk at some point, like, you were taking a look at it? Okay. Regardless of who wrote or who drafted it? Okay.

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- Rick Geist:** Get Linda to tell you how it was done. She'll laugh.
- Avigail Oren:** So, I want to back up to where I was. Okay. So, were there models, were other states doing this?
- Rick Geist:** You study what every state was doing.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** And, if they had something good, we would steal it.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** I didn't mind copying anything.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** We were way ahead of the country for a long time.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, in what ways?
- Rick Geist:** When I went down to the first Rails-to-Trails national conference and I sat in on three or four of the talks, I guess now, because we were light years ahead of what they were talking about.
- Avigail Oren:** In terms of legislation, in terms of construction?
- Rick Geist:** Financing in all ways.
- Avigail Oren:** Financing? Okay.
- Rick Geist:** In all ways, we were out ahead. And, one of the reasons we were out ahead is because of people like Linda. There weren't very many. I'll tell you – we can hold the [inaudible 0:40:09.1] in a phone booth. It was...
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, it was a few people. And so, would you say that the GAP Trail was actually sort of a national catalyst for a lot of this kind of...?
- Rick Geist:** Got a lot of people copying it.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah, okay.
- Rick Geist:** And also, have a lot of people copying the concept of end to end.

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Avigail Oren: And, by end to end, you mean a trail that goes from someplace relevant? I shouldn't say that. That's awful, okay.

[Chuckle]

Rick Geist: I like your sense of humor.

Avigail Oren: Yeah, it gets me in trouble sometimes. Okay, so this is the point at which I want to ask you – is there anything that I didn't think to- or know to ask you about that is really vital to the story?

Rick Geist: What's vital is that you had a point of a spear in Linda. And, I didn't do anything without discussing it with her. I mean, as far as I was concerned, it all flowed through her. And, people would come in my office – they would either complain for her, about her, or go try to go around her. And, I remember telling them, “Hey, we're all on the same team.”

Avigail Oren: We all want the same thing?

Rick Geist: Yeah.

Avigail Oren: Yeah.

Rick Geist: And, as far as I'm concerned, nothing gets done unless she says it gets done.

Avigail Oren: And...

Rick Geist: And, she knew she had that kind of power.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And, when you see a point of the spear, was that because she was sort of the embodiment of the vision?

Rick Geist: Smart.

Avigail Oren: She was smart.

Rick Geist: She's very smart.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: I mean, if you ever buy her being dumb and not understanding, I think...

Avigail Oren: You're in for it.

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Rick Geist: Not for a second.

Avigail Oren: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rick Geist: It will cost you your wallet.

Avigail Oren: Right, right.

Rick Geist: Yeah. I used to tell her, "I don't buy it for a second."

Avigail Oren: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so you really see her leadership as being vital to...

Rick Geist: I wouldn't be here without her.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. Okay. Well, the last thing I wanted to ask you about is your own personal enjoyment of the trail.

Rick Geist: I've ridden every inch of it.

Avigail Oren: How many times?

Rick Geist: I couldn't tell you.

Avigail Oren: Really?

Rick Geist: Many times. I've ridden it out of Pittsburgh. I think my favorite ride through was when a whole group of us rode the viaduct, Meyersdale all the way downtown Pittsburgh.

Avigail Oren: Yeah. And, was that the ride when it was intended to sort of show people the proof of the concept?

Rick Geist: We did the governor's ride which was another ride that we did.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: We did the governor's ride to show off the trail.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: And, to brag about Governor Ridge's support.

Avigail Oren: Okay. And, this was a later ride? That was your favorite one – once the trail was complete? Or, was it...?

Rick Geist: It wasn't completed and Big Savage wasn't built.

RICK GEIST INTERVIEW

- Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, all right. So, it's after the governor's ride but before the completion?
- Rick Geist:** Big Savage was a turning point.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah. So, what are your memories of Big Savage being...?
- Rick Geist:** I think Linda was in my office crying that we need to get this done and all that kind of stuff. I had a sit-down with the governor. Just the two of us. Talked about how to get it done and talked about building it the European spec. We didn't have any experts at PennDOT or the consulting industry doing that kind of construction.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah, I mean, they ended up bidding it out to a Canadian crew.
- Rick Geist:** There were some companies in Germany that I thought were great.
- Avigail Oren:** Mm-hmm. So, really...
- Rick Geist:** That's the finished product.
- Avigail Oren:** That's the finished what?
- Rick Geist:** Finished product.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah. And so, really, Governor Ridge was the one who had to have buy-in in order for Big Savage to...
- Rick Geist:** Governor Ridge was spectacular in this.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah, I mean, he was a champion as well.
- Rick Geist:** Absolutely.
- Avigail Oren:** And, was that because he was also a cyclist or he just thought...?
- Rick Geist:** He wasn't. I made him a cyclist.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** He stayed at my house, stayed at my house three different times. And, my wife was leading an Ambassador student basketball trip to Australia and New Zealand at the time. So,

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he did laundry at my house and talked about how to operate transportation, basically. And, I told him we'd take a campaign on a bicycle. And, that's where it all started. So, I took him to Pedal Power, we got him fitted for a bike and got him a Serotta. Ben Serotta built it. And, it was funny because when we first left Williamsport, they held a press conference up there beating up on the governor for not riding a Pennsylvania bike but riding a foreign bike. And, you know, we had Pennsylvania components on it. We would have had a Cannondale. They wouldn't let a bike go.

Avigail Oren: Wait, Cannondale is a Pennsylvania company?

Rick Geist: Yeah, they were built in Bedford.

Avigail Oren: Oh, I didn't realize that.

Rick Geist: So, we had him on the Serotta. And then, we had a counter press conference. And, I said, "Yeah, the components are out of Philadelphia **Maddock [? 0:46:02.3]** and the frame was built by a custom frame builder in the state of New York named Ben Serotta, a great guy. And, he's a Jewish frame builder.

Avigail Oren: So, yeah, it wasn't...

Rick Geist: The press had no idea that he was riding a foreign bike. Mike kept calling it "that foreign New York bike."

[Chuckle]

Avigail Oren: It's, like, such a Pennsylvania story. So, you got him into cycling.

Rick Geist: His campaign manager and chief of staff was so upset with me.

Avigail Oren: Why? Because it was a new distraction?

Rick Geist: Well, things that could go wrong.

Avigail Oren: Right, okay.

Rick Geist: No, please. I'm going to say this differently. Women loved Tom Ridge in spandex.

RICK GEIST INTERVIEW

Avigail Oren: Say no more.

[Chuckle]

Rick Geist: Six-four, very good looking, well built...

Avigail Oren: And, newly buff or buffer...

Rick Geist: Yes.

Avigail Oren: ...once you took up cycling, all right.

Rick Geist: I was another guy that worked for him. We were security for the first ride.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: That's putting your life in their hands.

[Chuckle]

Avigail Oren: All right. So, Governor Ridge was really instrumental in getting Big Savage built.

Rick Geist: He was great to work with. Great.

Avigail Oren: And, I know when you say "great," what does that mean? He was supportive? You know, what do you mean, great?

Rick Geist: He wanted nothing other than to help.

Avigail Oren: Okay.

Rick Geist: He wanted nothing. Couldn't get anything for me. I gave him everything anyhow.

Avigail Oren: Right.

Rick Geist: But, yeah, we did Peachy [sic] Street in Erie. That was one of the best things we ever did because I'd say, "Well Governor, now you know we did Peachy Street. Let's do this for the trails and stuff."

Avigail Oren: Okay. Just tell me what Peachy Street was.

Rick Geist: That was an avenue, a business avenue in Erie.

Avigail Oren: In Erie. And, it was just a revitalization project?

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- Rick Geist:** Yeah, yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And so, he saw this as part of his larger infrastructure agenda in the state?
- Rick Geist:** He thought it was a really good thing.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay.
- Rick Geist:** He really bought into the concept of a linear park. He really bought into the concept of what it did for tourism in the southwest, poverty area of Fayette and those counties.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, what an economic driver it could be. Great. Okay, well, any last thoughts you want to commit to posterity?
- Rick Geist:** No, I really wish you luck with this. I think it's great. I've never talked as much about it ever.
- Avigail Oren:** Well, I'm so glad we got to capture it, thank you.
- Rick Geist:** I never talked about how the deals were made or what we did. I bragged about Linda in public and stuff. There's not enough bragging to ever really tell her story.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah.
- Rick Geist:** Not enough.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing. I'm going to stop the recording.

[End 0:49:13.0]

cr-t/p

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