

Curb Enthusiasm Episode 5 Transcript

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;03;08

Emily Weidenhof

Welcome to Curb Enthusiasm. I'm Emily Weidenhof.

00;00;03;14 - 00;00;05;00

Diniece Mendes

And I'm Diniece Mendes

00;00;05;02 - 00;00;22;26

Emily Weidenhof

On this episode, we chat with Veronica Davis. Veronica is a self-described transportation nerd and author of Inclusive Transportation: A Manifesto for Repairing Divided Communities. She believes everyone should have access to safe, reliable and affordable transportation.

00;00;22;28 - 00;00;32;24

Diniece Mendes

She is currently the Director of Cities Program for Atkins Realis and has over 20 years of experience in civil engineering and planning under the Mayor Turner administration,

00;00;32;29 - 00;00;37;28

Diniece Mendes

She was the director of transportation and drainage operations for the city of Houston.

00;00;38;00 - 00;00;47;01

Emily Weidenhof

She also served as the vice president and City of Houston representative for NACTO, the National Association of City Transportation Officials.

00;00;47;04 - 00;00;58;22

Diniece Mendes

Veronica earned her dual master's degrees in engineering management and regional planning from Cornell University, and she has a Bachelor of Science in civil engineering from the University of Maryland.

00;00;58;24 - 00;01;07;12

Emily Weidenhof

All right, Veronica, welcome to Curb Enthusiasm and to New York, which, you took a multi-modal trip to get here.

00;01;07;13 - 00;01;09;03

Veronica Davis

Yes, thank you so much for having me.

00;01;09;08 - 00;01;10;25

Diece Mendes

Nice to have you.

00;01;10;28 - 00;01;29;05

Emily Weidenhof

So, your expertise is both in engineering and urban planning and with a foot in both worlds. Like, what do you think planners and engineers can do to better communicate with each other and also better communicate what they do and the value of what they do with communities that they're working in?

00;01;29;11 - 00;01;49;11

Veronica Davis

You know, I'll say this most recently, I was at the city of Houston, the director of transportation and Drainage operations and having an operations and management function, I feel like all planners and engineers need to do that at some point, because I will say, if you'd asked me four years ago this question, I would say, yeah, engineers and planners need to work better together.

00;01;49;18 - 00;02;12;29

Veronica Davis

They need to work on the process together, because what tends to happen is there'll be a planning project, the planners lead it, come up with the design, and then the engineering teams take over and they're like, this doesn't work for this, this and this reason. And I think particularly with planners, we're just looking building face to building face at the surface of a road, whereas engineers have to think in 3D.

00;02;12;29 - 00;02;34;13

Veronica Davis

And so, we say, oh, just move the curb line. And then the engineers are like, time out. Moving the curb line puts it on top of the water line. If we move the water line now, we have to move the gas line. And so, there's just a different level of understanding of the complications beneath our feet. But having an operations and management function, I would have planned and designed a lot of projects differently.

00;02;34;13 - 00;02;55;07

Veronica Davis

I think that oftentimes we do a plan and then operations and maintenance is like the last paragraph of the last page that no one ever really reads. And I think it needs to be emphasized more because I definitely would have designed bike lanes differently. I would

have designed a lot of roadways differently, knowing that at some point this has to be maintained by somebody.

00;02;55;10 - 00;03;17;18

Emily Weidenhof

Absolutely. Yeah. At D O T, with all of our infrastructure, but also our public spaces, like it's not just about having an amazing design, but it's about having a plan to really maintain and care for it over the long term. And that's also a huge part of the equity factor, is making sure that all of our streets are maintained for everybody in the city.

00;03;17;21 - 00;03;28;28

Diniece Mendes

Yeah. I'm also curious, from your perspective, how the profession actually needs to change to really sort of reflect this line of thinking. You know, I guess on both ends.

00;03;29;01 - 00;03;42;03

Veronica Davis

Number one, I think both on the planning and the engineering side, we don't really train people to deal with communities. You know, even planners, they might do community engagement for a class, like for their community.

00;03;42;03 - 00;03;59;13

Veronica Davis

You know, they'll have a studio class, and they might work with a small constituency. But I think it's different to actually have to plan and structure a meeting that informs what you're trying to do, and you can kind of learn it at the job, but I think that that is a challenge that we have for both planners and engineers.

00;03;59;16 - 00;04;19;25

Veronica Davis

We don't focus on the people aspect. With engineering, we say again, this is how you do the cut and fill, and this is how you determine the curve. But no one says, oh, and by the way, there's a cemetery right there. So, you might want to design the curve to go around the cemetery. Or there's operational things happening with freight, with busses.

00;04;19;27 - 00;04;46;23

Veronica Davis

So, I think overall educationally that is something that can be better. I think also for the for both professions we need more diversity. And not just, there's gender diversity, there's racial diversity. There is diversity of where people come from. Because I will say, even for me, having lived mostly on the East Coast, going to Texas, I have a different view and a different appreciation.

00;04;46;23 - 00;05;07;25

Veronica Davis

And I'm not as dogmatic about certain things given the context of being in a Texas city. And so being involved in the National Association of City Transportation Officials and the update of the bike guide, it's bringing that thinking of, yes, there's a lot of DCs. New York is always going to be literally on an island of its own.

00;05;07;28 - 00;05;37;25

Veronica Davis

But many cities, particularly in the Midwest, in the South, are more like Texas than they are like these cities. And these are just things that we have to consider. And so, you need that diversity of people that can say, I grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and, you know, everyone has this or I grew up here. And, you know, from my perspective in Texas, having lived in Houston, you know, everyone has a big truck, and not even just like the Ford F-150, there's a Texas Edition, which is even bigger than a traditional Ford F-150.

00;05;38;02 - 00;06;03;15

Veronica Davis

So, my design vehicle is in a sedan like most cities. I got a design for these big old trucks to maneuver. And so I think that is what's needed in the profession that just have that overall diversity of thought, bringing in people with disabilities and not just the one wheelchair person and say, you're going to represent all the disabilities, but bring in people that have cognitive disabilities, people that have visual impairment, people that are hard of hearing.

00;06;03;15 - 00;06;22;10

Veronica Davis

I know that in DC they have Gallaudet University, which is a university that caters to people who are deaf and hard of hearing, and they have been focusing on what does design lean to look like for someone that American Sign Language is their primary means of communication. How does that design need to look? What is the lighting need to look like?

00;06;22;10 - 00;06;31;03

Veronica Davis

How wide do the sidewalks need to be? So, I think that to me, at the root of all of it is we just need more diversity of thought within our within our industry.

00;06;31;06 - 00;06;41;05

Diniece Mendes

And you are a thought leader in this space and transportation and within the industry. We know that the arc of change is long, but it doesn't always have to be.

00;06;41;05 - 00;06;49;09

Diniece Mendes

What are some of the traits that you think are most important for leaders in this space today and for tomorrow?

00;06;49;12 - 00;07;15;12

Veronica Davis

I'm going to give you two, because there's a lot I could say. I would say there's two. So first and foremost is empathy. I think that all leaders need to have a level of empathy and that is not just about patronizing other people, but truly being curious about people, being curious about where they're from, being curious about how they move, being curious about, how they feel about why is this parking space so important to them?

00;07;15;14 - 00;07;36;05

Veronica Davis

And just having that level of curiosity about different types of people, and not just when it's convenient, where I'm trying to do this project, but truly, immersing yourself in a culture that's not yours, decentering yourself. Secondly, I will say what leaders need to be, and this is not necessarily going to feel like a leadership quality.

00;07;36;07 - 00;07;57;09

Veronica Davis

But they need to, as you grow in your career, make sure that you financially never need your job. And what I mean is, as you get a little bit more money, don't just go buy a bigger house, don't go buy car, don't spend more, truly save and have a pot of money, an emergency pot of money that you don't ever need that job.

00;07;57;12 - 00;08;22;15

Veronica Davis

And I say it because being in these seats, being in leadership seats, require a lot of boldness, a fearlessness, and the willingness to push to do the right thing. And if you need your job to pay your monthly bills, you can't be fearless. I don't really it doesn't matter who you are. Self-preservation is going to kick in when you need to feed your family, when you need to take care of your household.

00;08;22;16 - 00;08;48;06

Veronica Davis

Self-preservation is always going to kick in and you'll bend in your fold in order to just keep getting your paycheck every other week. But truly, to make the change that we need in these organized actions, you need bold leaders that don't need this job. So those are the two leadership qualities empathy and curiosity for others. And then financially being, secure as you were growing in your career.

00;08;48;09 - 00;09;15;26

Emily Weidenhof

So, you've talked a little bit about your work in Texas, in Houston, specifically where you were director of Transportation and drainage operations, and Houston, a city with no zoning, which can seem otherworldly to us New Yorkers who have such a deep history with

zoning. But I think one thing we clearly share is the relationship of how water shapes, the city of, of New York as well as Houston.

00;09;15;26 - 00;09;25;10

Emily Weidenhof

And so, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about how a city's water systems and network impact your planning approach?

00;09;25;12 - 00;09;37;21

Veronica Davis

So first, I do want to make sure I explain. So, the reason why my title is transportation and drainage operations. I don't think that there's many people out there that have that title. But in the city of Houston, the roads are part of the drainage system.

00;09;37;21 - 00;10;13;02

Veronica Davis

So, when you see, you know, roads flooded in a rain event, it's kind of like, all right, well, call me when the rain stops. If the water still there we'll come out. And that becomes challenging because what is working to help on the drainage side then be makes impassable roads on the roadway side. I think the biggest thing that I took away from the whole experience is we have to really think about climate change, and not in a way that is intangible to people, because I think sometimes, we talk about sea level rise, or some people call land subsidence.

00;10;13;04 - 00;10;34;04

Veronica Davis

That feels far away. I think the tangible things are our storms, which is getting more intense. It's not about the hurricanes, right? Like I think sometimes, especially being in Texas, hurricanes can be in the front of mind of people. It's not really the hurricanes as much as it is just it's Monday and it's raining and it's these intense rainstorms.

00;10;34;15 - 00;10;53;03

Veronica Davis

So, I grew up in New Jersey, and when I look at New York City and you have these intense rains and it's like the subways always flooding and like maybe it happened growing up, but I don't remember the subways flooding at the level that they did when I was growing up. But also, I don't remember rain being as intense as it was when I was growing up.

00;10;53;03 - 00;11;17;01

Veronica Davis

And so, I think that, you know, that's what we have to plan for. The fact that even as I was leaving Texas, we got hit with the derecho, which I don't even know what a derecho is. It came out of nowhere. And just the amount of damage that the storm did, it was 100 plus

mile an hour winds for just 10 minutes, and the city is still trying to, you know, recuperate and get back on track from that incident.

00;11;17;03 - 00;11;33;27

Veronica Davis

And so, as I think about water it, we really have to think about water as kind of one water. And I know that's like the new buzz topic in the industry, but I know on the drinking water side, which was also in my department, but not under me, we had two droughts. And so, they're like, we don't have any water.

00;11;33;27 - 00;11;52;20

Veronica Davis

And I'm like, I got plenty of water, you know? And so, I think we have to start thinking holistically about storm water and drinking water. Opportunities to reuse storm water when we have these events. I think we have to think differently about resiliency. And what does that look like? Because I think we're trying to fight this losing battle.

00;11;53;02 - 00;12;14;05

Veronica Davis

I joked one time when I was standing in a road in Houston, I was like, can I give this road back to God? Because I can't win? You know, we can spend millions and millions of dollars rebuilding this road, and it's still going to have the same challenges because we're in the floodplain. And I think that for many cities, we're going to have to start having these challenging conversations.

00;12;14;07 - 00;12;20;19

Veronica Davis

We're going to have to start thinking about how we're building and how we are protecting, different communities.

00;12;20;21 - 00;12;41;25

Emily Weidenhof

And as you work across cities, are you starting to see trends emerge in terms of being able to deal with some of these very complex challenges, as well as just opportunities for messaging the impacts of, of climate change to communities and to governments?

00;12;41;28 - 00;13;09;12

Veronica Davis

So, I think that we're getting there, but we're not there yet across different cities. I think the conversation, it's kind of there, but I don't know that we have truly, reckoned with what resiliency really means and what it really takes to get there. And as an example, it's, you know, for a lot of cities right now, they're just trying to recover from whatever the last disaster was.

00;13;09;14 - 00;13;30;19

Veronica Davis

You know, you have North Carolina, they're going to be recovering for the next decade. I mean, think about New York City. You're still recovering from Sandy. You know, and in in Houston, we're still recovering from Harvey. And so, it's so hard to even look at the future when you're just like, we're just trying to get back, to what we were.

00;13;30;19 - 00;13;53;28

Veronica Davis

And so, I don't know that we're there, and I think that it's also hard, to look to the future when the now is in your face. When today, I already don't have enough money. I don't have enough people. The boomers are leaving the workforce in droves. You're starting to have, the older gen-xers beginning to leave the workforce, and now you want me to think about?

00;13;53;28 - 00;14;09;12

Veronica Davis

I can't. I can't. Pick a battle, pick your struggle. Right. And so right now, my struggle is I'm just trying to get everybody back to where they were. And so, I think that there's a desire there. But I don't know that we're really doing what we need to do in this country.

00;14;09;14 - 00;14;27;00

Diniece Mendes

Yeah. Emily touched on sort of the, the layers of sort of the resilience of infrastructure and sort of the equity components about all of that thinking about the, the sense of urgency, the cost to be able to like deliver that level of service for our communities.

00;14;27;02 - 00;14;39;14

Diniece Mendes

Can you talk a little bit about that from your perspective, having worked in Houston and elsewhere, but there's so much to sort of like unpack and sort of think about how we prioritize infrastructure for communities.

00;14;39;16 - 00;14;48;21

Veronica Davis

Particularly as we think about black, brown, low-income communities. I don't really care what city in this country you are. The problems are the same.

00;14;48;26 - 00;15;09;10

Veronica Davis

It is where you're going to have your high injury network, which means people are dying or being seriously injured. It is where you're going to have your high asthma rates. It's where you're going to have your high obesity. It is where you're likely going to have some other

environmental things in the air. You know, whether it's chemicals, whether it's, you know, brownfields, it's compounding issues.

00;15;09;12 - 00;15;32;28

Veronica Davis

And so, equity says, okay, how do I really be able to serve this community? And then there's the grappling part of there's so many challenges. How do you begin to tackle it? Right. And as an example, we had a community in Houston were, there's a cancer cluster. They're sitting on top of a creosote plume. It's also the 100-year flood plain.

00;15;33;00 - 00;15;54;00

Veronica Davis

And we were grappling with that. And so there was a voluntary buyout program that is being stood up. You're not forced to go, but even then, there's challenges because people want to stay in their community. So, I think it's hard. But also, I had the benefit of, we had these things called complete communities, and that is where each community, there was 10 of them.

00;15;54;00 - 00;16;13;00

Veronica Davis

They wrote their own action plans. And our directive by the mayor at the time was, give the people what they've asked for. And we did, and we brought in well over \$200 million of bipartisan infrastructure law money, which will go to these communities. All the money that Houston brought in is going to, black, brown, low-income communities.

00;16;13;06 - 00;16;30;16

Veronica Davis

And it came from being able to make the decision, being willing to make the decision, even when you have council members that are saying, what about my community? And you're like, I hear you. It's not unsafe. It's not it could be safer. But this is the priority. But let me work with you to address your issue.

00;16;30;19 - 00;16;36;12

Emily Weidenhof

I love how you're talking about, both merging the bottom up and the top down.

00;16;36;12 - 00;17;02;27

Emily Weidenhof

And so curious, you know, that that kind of affective middle and translating both perspectives, both views. If you just have some good tips for people to really be making those really critical connections, because no matter what you're dealing with in planning or transportation, it's big and big is hard. And so, we need those translators to be connecting the different views of the scales.

00;17;02;27 - 00;17;27;01

Veronica Davis

Yeah, one of the things I have learned, it's we have to just talk in the community's language. I think so often we have things that we use, and we'll say mobility and we'll say equity and we'll say, accessibility. To a layperson, it doesn't mean anything. And then when you have different professions, mobility in our world and mobility in the medical world is very different.

00;17;27;04 - 00;17;43;06

Veronica Davis

Mobility in the economic world is very different. We're not even speaking the same language. And I think it's incumbent upon us to just start where the community is. They may not say the right term, but we can't pretend we don't understand what they're saying. We just have to ask questions. Okay, tell me more. What is this thing that you're talking about?

00;17;43;08 - 00;17;58;27

Veronica Davis

Okay, tell me a little bit more. Oh, okay, I got you. I understand what you're saying to me. I was, joking the other day, we need to talk at a level of a ten-year-old can understand. And if a ten-year-old can't understand what we're saying, then the community at large doesn't understand what we're saying.

00;17;59;00 - 00;18;19;20

Veronica Davis

And as an example, you know, we'll say things like, cyclist, what about people on bikes? That's something that's a very clear image of what we're talking about. You know, as we talk about, you know, mobility. What does that even mean? Well, it is about people having options to be able to just get to work, to play to social.

00;18;20;02 - 00;18;41;25

Veronica Davis

So, I think that's really what's important about the translation, you know, forget about even other languages, like, even for people that English is their only language. They don't understand what we're saying. And I think we as professionals have to be more cognizant of that and making sure that we're we are speaking, taking the time to do additional explanation and in a way that they can understand.

00;18;41;27 - 00;18;56;13

Diniece Mendes

Yeah. That's great. So, your career has sort of transitioned from the federal government working for cities, working for a private sector. Can you shed some light on one of your most transformative projects that you've had an opportunity to work on?

00;18;56;15 - 00;19;06;19

Veronica Davis

Oh my gosh. Most transformative projects. You know, I'll say this one, one of my most transformative projects, it was, working in the city of Houston.

00;19;06;21 - 00;19;31;13

Veronica Davis

And so, as I mentioned earlier, we had these complete communities and the gulf, the Gulfton, neighborhood is we call it Little Ellis Island. No offense to the New Yorkers. But largely it's because you have a lot of immigrants that are coming into Houston, and they settle in this community because, like all immigrants, you tend to settle where there's people from your country that understand your language, your religion, your culture.

00;19;31;15 - 00;19;52;12

Veronica Davis

And so, in this one particular community, it's a lot of immigrants who aren't driving, who are depending on bus, walking and biking. And we took this road. And when you look at the picture of this road, it is like an eight-lane road with the median. And of course it's dangerous. And people were getting struck and killed or seriously injured.

00;19;52;15 - 00;20;14;19

Veronica Davis

And so, we took away a few lanes of traffic at it and a concrete protected bike lane. As I've mentioned, it's Texas. So, a concrete protected bike lane, and then eventually added in asphalt art at the intersection where the community worked with artists in order to, do something that displayed what they wanted. And since then, there have been no fatalities or serious injuries.

00;20;14;19 - 00;20;44;24

Veronica Davis

There have been crashes. But a crash is a bad day. At the end of the day, you know, it really is about making sure people are walking away from the crash and not requiring additional medical attention. And so, we were able to achieve that. And then in addition, being able to get some reconnecting communities, planning money in order to extend the project to the other side of the highway, in order to connect this community to a transit center, which would give them access to more busses, to move throughout the city.

00;20;44;28 - 00;20;50;13

Veronica Davis

So that's one of the really, to me, transformative projects, that I had a chance to work on.

00;20;50;15 - 00;21;13;23

Emily Weidenhof

Great. So, you talked a lot about great conversations with communities and really being empathetic and positioning yourself and your planning work to understand communities

where you're working. Could you talk a little bit about reaching communities to begin with? You know, different communities with different needs.

00;21;13;23 - 00;21;25;00

Emily Weidenhof

There's also, physical, piece of, of that communication. And could you talk a little bit about successes and what you think we need to do about creating space for these important conversations?

00;21;25;03 - 00;21;38;05

Veronica Davis

Yeah. You know, one of the challenges of public engagement is we love to have public meetings in the evening, right? During dinner time in a stale elementary school with the dead roach in the corner, right?

00;21;38;27 - 00;22;01;24

Veronica Davis

And we're like, oh, only 50 people came to the meeting, right? And we already know who's going to come before we even showed up. I don't care where you work, you know, who's going to be there and what their issues are. And that's because generally, you know, it's the people passionately, for or passionately against the project and they're going to show up and there's this whole group in the middle that are just trying to survive.

00;22;01;25 - 00;22;21;05

Veronica Davis

They're just trying to get through the next day and, you know, get through the work shift, pick up their child from childcare, feed their family and keep it moving. And so, it really is about meaningful public engagement and ensuring that you're reaching at least a representative population of the community. And what that looks like is going to where they are.

00;22;21;18 - 00;22;43;05

Veronica Davis

I share, so I'm the author of Inclusive Transportation: A Manifesto for Repairing Divided Communities. And one of the projects I talk about is a bus project. And what we did was we looked at the data to see when people getting on and off the bus. We knew quickly we weren't doing any engagement in the morning, because everyone's just focused on getting on the bus and getting to work.

00;22;43;07 - 00;23;00;17

Veronica Davis

But what we did was we focused on the evening, and we focused on, different shifts to get shift workers, who weren't moving at traditional, peak hours. And we literally just set up the meeting in the bus. And so, people stepped off the bus and they were in the meeting and they were like, okay, I guess I'm here.

00;23;00;19 - 00;23;23;12

Veronica Davis

And then we designed, you know, to have very focused questions. Because getting someone off the street, you have about five minutes of their attention. So, what information do you want to give them in that five minutes? What information do you want to get from them in that five minutes? And, I have a lot of data to show that when we did this, we were able to almost perfectly, from a demographic perspective, match the community.

00;23;23;12 - 00;23;39;22

Veronica Davis

Did we talk to everyone? No. But demographically, we were able to match English speakers, non-English speakers, gender, age and income. So, it's just it's about that intentionality and the quest to be meaningful and your engagement.

00;23;39;24 - 00;23;50;00

Emily Weidenhof

Hey listeners, we hope you're enjoying this episode of our podcast. For those of you who are as enthusiastic about transportation and planning as we are, we'd like to hear from you.

00;23;50;03 - 00;24;01;14

Emily Weidenhof

You can submit topics and questions that you'd like us to cover at nyc.gov/curbenthusiasm. And now back to our conversation.

00;24;01;16 - 00;24;23;03

Emily Weidenhof

So, transportation and land use policies are really inextricably linked, especially when it comes to climate change. Could you talk a little bit about what you're seeing in terms of project prioritization, funding that's coming down the line, as we are taking a stronger step towards addressing the climate crisis?

00;24;23;05 - 00;24;50;00

Veronica Davis

I actually just recently finished a book, Paved Paradise. And so, I think where those two really intersect is around the parking side of it. Parking is probably the third, fourth, and fifth rail of politics. Nobody wants to lose their parking. I know New York is definitely featured in that book, for your listeners haven't had a chance to read it, but I think that's where we can have an impact, and that's where the transportation profession can begin to start moving the needle.

00;24;50;02 - 00;25;09;11

Veronica Davis

And that is things like removing some of the parking minimums and doing away with parking where we know we don't need it when we were trying to get housing on top of transit stations are in transit rich areas. But if we can just remove that parking element, you know, it gives us the ability to build more houses and more affordably because we don't have to build the parking.

00;25;09;13 - 00;25;35;16

Veronica Davis

And so, I think that that is kind of we're slowly getting there. And I think is the housing crisis is really continuing to confront us. We're slowly addressing it, I will say, an opportunity as we come out of the pandemic of Covid and transition into the endemic of, you know, our downtowns. I know New York is a little bit different of, again, you guys are always in your own, you know, conversation bubble.

00;25;35;19 - 00;25;57;01

Veronica Davis

But I think for a lot of other cities, they're grappling with their downtowns. People don't want to go back to work. And so all these articles shaming people about not being in the office, and they're like, that's cool. I'm still not going back to work. And you have vacant buildings and some cities are looking at, okay, well, how do we start transitioning some of these offices to residential?

00;25;57;01 - 00;26;21;20

Veronica Davis

We know we need housing for people, and I think you'll start to see more of that. Just because the employment market has been very clear, we're not going back to the office. And if you make us go back to the office, we're just going to change jobs. And guess what? You need every employee right now. So I do think that in a couple of years we'll start to see, more housing in downtown areas, and hopefully it begins to start easing some of that housing burden.

00;26;21;26 - 00;26;36;19

Veronica Davis

And then from a transportation perspective, we should start to see then transit ridership go back up into the downtown. You know, transit ridership is up and some of those ancillary routes. But I think we'll start to see that increase again in the downtown routes.

00;26;36;21 - 00;26;58;19

Emily Weidenhof

An exciting pivot that we saw in New York over the course of the pandemic was a lot of demand for public space and other types of transformative street projects that we had typically focused in downtown areas, commercial districts, you know, where there are already a lot of people through open streets.

00;26;58;19 - 00;27;21;15

Emily Weidenhof

We saw demand for these types of treatments in residential neighborhoods. And so that's been a really interesting shift to bring and translate a lot of these types of street transformations to neighborhoods where they're equally as important. They're about, you know, getting kids to school safely or people being able to walk to a park or other. The grocery store, for example.

00;27;21;15 - 00;27;26;23

Emily Weidenhof

So that's also an interesting, trend that we are seeing in New York.

00;27;26;23 - 00;27;52;26

Veronica Davis

Absolutely. Economically, it makes sense. I mean, storing an unused vehicle, is very expensive. And we have seated our, you know, our curbside to vehicle storage. And we all know that having a restaurant and that same parking space is going to generate more economics, right? The sales tax revenue, the jobs that are being created, because now there's more servers that have to serve these areas.

00;27;52;29 - 00;28;28;27

Veronica Davis

We know that overall that that is better. And so I hope that I love the trend. I hope it continues, and I hope that people are truly documenting, the impact of that trend so that we can say, all right, you can have this parking space that someone may pay \$35 a year for a permit to park the car there, or this parking space can generate, you know, \$xxx of revenue each day as a restaurant, as an extended bookstore, you know, or just as people are going to other restaurants and then just sitting there and recreating with their child.

00;28;29;00 - 00;28;42;22

Veronica Davis

You know, I think that we have to start telling that story more, and helping people understand the trade offs of, you know, is that parking that important to you or is this experience that you could have more important?

00;28;42;24 - 00;28;49;13

Emily Weidenhof

Absolutely. It's not just about taking something away, but it's about getting so much more out of the space.

00;28;49;16 - 00;29;13;22

Diniece Mendes

So we've seen within the current administration with the bipartisan infrastructure law a real focus on the justice 40 initiatives, which really brings and conversations around urban

development and transportation and really trying to prioritize where some of these investments are being made. Can you speak to sort of the significance of being able to bring in the urban development piece to the transportation conversation?

00;29;13;22 - 00;29;22;03

Diniece Mendes

Because I think that oftentimes it's missing and there are some missed opportunities. That have implications for like mobility and transportation systems within cities.

00;29;22;05 - 00;29;36;29

Veronica Davis

I will say that the bipartisan infrastructure law, and so at the time that it was passed, I was the vice president of the National Association of City Transportation Officials, and we were definitely at the forefront of making sure cities got direct funding.

00;29;37;02 - 00;30;01;20

Veronica Davis

One of the projects that the city of Houston received, it was a Safe Streets for All grant. It was the most dangerous road that the city owned, where people were being killed and seriously injured. It also is an area where there is a lot of sex trafficking, and sex work, and it is using this transportation money to be able to start multi solving many problems.

00;30;01;20 - 00;30;20;28

Emily Weidenhof

And so being able to work with, the Houston Police Department to begin to solve these challenges in a way that is humane. In a way that is respectful, and in a way that improves the overall corridor. So I think that's one of the exciting things of everything that is happening. And what I'm really excited to see.

00;30;20;28 - 00;30;46;00

Emily Weidenhof

I also serve on the U.S. Department of Transportation's Advisory Committee on Transportation Equity, and some of the recommendations that we provided to U S D O T was with this bipartisan infrastructure law money, is make sure that we are evaluating our effectiveness and not just once the project is complete, but let's be intentional to come back in two years and five years.

00;30;46;02 - 00;31;02;09

Veronica Davis

So that did we make this road safer? Did we encourage economic development? Most importantly, is the community still here to be able to enjoy this project that we put in their community? And I think those things are extremely important.

00;31;02;11 - 00;31;22;18

Emily Weidenhof

What are some evaluation metrics that you're seeing other cities, develop that start to speak to the co-benefits of these types of projects that go beyond just the safety, the economic benefits, like what are what are some great examples of drawing out more of the valuable layers of this type of work?

00;31;22;22 - 00;31;54;11

Veronica Davis

One of the things I share in my book is Interstate I-10 through East Baton Rouge, took property from my family. So my mother, was in high school at the time when she was displaced in order to build I-10. And so there's people alive today who remember, what that looks like. And so I think, that is the type of metrics and I'm interested in seeing of not just economically did we improve, which is important, not just the reconnection, but the fact that we are doing reparations

00;31;54;14 - 00;32;10;26

Veronica Davis

To families, to businesses that are no longer here because they were asked to leave so that we could build this infrastructure. And so that's what I think is an exciting metric, if you will, or or a tactic that I'm really interested to see how that, is able to pan out.

00;32;10;28 - 00;32;12;25

Diniece Mendes

Yeah. Restorative justice.

00;32;12;28 - 00;32;36;22

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah, absolutely. And I think we also often see that when there are, disasters, oftentimes the money can go to the people who are coming in and new and rebuilding versus really focusing on who was there, who was impacted, who struggled the most to try to stay and keep things afloat.

00;32;36;24 - 00;32;50;06

Emily Weidenhof

And so also thinking about how we can recognize supporting the, you know, legacy community as much as supporting kind of new continued growth to, you know, allow these communities to thrive in the future.

00;32;51;03 - 00;33;00;12

Veronica Davis

And because you've made the improvements, the unfortunate part is you've now have made it more attractive and so you really then have that next challenge.

00;33;00;12 - 00;33;16;19

Veronica Davis

And as some people like to call it, gentrification, I think it's, a little bit more nuanced than that. But I think that's also part of it. And that balance and that fear, sometimes that communities have of why are you coming to me now? So I've been here, you know, where have you been? Why are you here now?

00;33;16;19 - 00;33;36;05

Veronica Davis

Oh, then you must not be doing this for me, because if you were doing this for me, you'd done this decades ago. And so I think that there is at other, you know, sensitivity that we have to have, as practitioners when we work with communities of there is a lack of trust. Because the last time we were there, we destroyed their community, and now we're coming back.

00;33;36;09 - 00;33;57;29

Veronica Davis

We're the government and we're here to fix it. And it's like, okay, why are you fixing it now? Who's coming in? And that's where, you know, bike lanes in particular, you know, kind of get wrapped up in, oh, it's for the white people. And so I think we have to just overall do a better job of communication and having that cultural sensitivity every time we work with communities.

00;33;58;02 - 00;34;16;23

Diniece Mendes

Yeah. We're going to switch a little lighthearted, tone. You, mentioned sort of your, your journey to get here, for this podcast and taking the subway. So I'm curious, what is your, biggest breach of subway etiquette?

00;34;16;26 - 00;34;26;14

Veronica Davis

Oh, my gosh, it is the it is, when a man sits down on that subway and spreads across, like, three seats, like.

00;34;26;14 - 00;34;44;22

Veronica Davis

Sir, please close your legs. That is my biggest thing. Like, get your knee off of me. Do not touch me. That is the biggest breach of subway etiquette. Number two would be not standing to the right on an escalator, but number one is the bigger one.

00;34;44;25 - 00;34;54;09

Diniece Mendes

Yeah, that that is that that is debatable too. And depending on, like which part of the city or like countries that may drive on the different side of the road.

00;34;54;09 - 00;34;56;23

Diniece Mendes

I do see that there are some differences overall.

00;34;57;22 - 00;35;21;21

Emily Weidenhof

I also feel like people got a little comfortable with the extra space on the subway when ridership was low over the pandemic. So I also see plenty of people with like, you know, a bag sitting next to them and just like, you know, kind of spreading out a little bit, a little, a little too relaxed for, you know, yeah, full, full train cars and lots of different people with different needs.

00;35;21;23 - 00;35;31;12

Emily Weidenhof

So also wanted to ask you something we ask all of our guests, what are you enthusiastic about the future of transportation?

00;35;31;15 - 00;35;45;28

Veronica Davis

Oh, what am I most enthusiastic about? You know, I'll say this. I think the thing that has been the most exciting about the bipartisan infrastructure law is the investment in high speed rail. And I think that that becomes exciting.

00;35;46;00 - 00;36;05;23

Veronica Davis

As mentioned, I took Amtrak to get here today from Maryland, and it was a great trip. But imagine that trip being half the time, and, and what it could do. And so I think that investment is, is really, really exciting. And I hope that these projects are able to move forward. I think that that's the thing I'm most excited about.

00;36;05;25 - 00;36;22;09

Veronica Davis

Just being able to connect different cities, being able to move faster, between cities particularly, you know, the Northeast Corridor, you know, as we all know, is probably, it is the most travel corridor. And so imagine, you know, New York to DC. I don't know what the time is like. Was it at 90 minutes is what they're saying?

00;36;22;10 - 00;36;23;10

Diniece Mendes

On Acela?

00;36;23;12 - 00;36;26;00

Veronica Davis

No, no. On the actual high speed rail.

00;36;26;00 - 00;36;26;25

Diniece Mendes

Oh yeah.

00;36;26;25 - 00;36;28;09

Veronica Davis

What is this supposed to be? I don't remember.

00;36;28;09 - 00;36;28;22

Diniece Mendes

I'm not entirely sure.

00;36;28;22 - 00;36;47;07

Veronica Davis

But it's going to be like half the time. Like like 90 minutes. Could you imagine? You know, that opens up even, from a work perspective, you know, the ability to live in New York and work in Philadelphia or, you know, live in Philadelphia, work in DC.

00;36;47;07 - 00;36;49;22

Veronica Davis

So I think that's what I'm most excited about.

00;36;49;24 - 00;37;06;28

Emily Weidenhof

Great. Well, Veronica, thank you so much for being here today. And I can say I think we're certainly excited to see what you do with your extra hour, hour and a half once high speed rail is implemented. So excited for what you are able to achieve with all that extra time.

00;37;07;01 - 00;37;08;13

Veronica Davis

Thank you all for having me.

00;37;08;16 - 00;37;11;23

Diniece Mendes

Thank you.

00;37;11;25 - 00;37;40;13

Ydanis Rodriguez

Hi. My name is Ydanis Rodriguez, commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation. Thank you for listening to Curb Enthusiasm by New York City DOT. This episode was produced by Michael Santos with video support from Sigurjon Gudjonsson, Juan Vega, and Nazareth Battice. Theme music by Michael Santos. Curb Enthusiasm is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and other major streaming platforms.

00;37;40;16 - 00;38;03;28

Ydanis Rodriguez

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