



Media Contact:
Lisa Levy Buch
Director of Public Affairs
MGLFE Construction Authority
(626) 305-7004 or (909) 267-0161 cell
llevybuch@foothillextension.org

Interview with Construction Authority CEO Habib F. Balian

Q: What does completion of the Gold Line Bridge mean for the Construction Authority and the Foothill Extension project?

HB: Completion of the bridge on time and on budget is an important milestone for the overall Foothill Extension project. The Construction Authority recognized that in order to keep the light rail extension on schedule, the bridge completion had to be an early action item. We knew the process would be extensive because Caltrans would need additional time to review and approve the plans, especially with the unique design of the structure and seismic conditions under the bridge. For that reason, we decided to bid a separate design-build contract for the Gold Line Bridge, which we awarded to Skanska USA in June 2010.

Skanska has done an outstanding job staying on schedule. In fact, it took Caltrans longer than we expected to approve the design for the project. However, even with that delay, Skanska has been able to keep the project moving and has stayed on schedule for project completion in December 2012. This has allowed us to meet our critical milestone schedule for the alignment contractor, who will be responsible for following Skanska, incorporating utilities, track, etc. onto the bridge as part of the light rail construction.

Q: Is the project on budget? How much of the budget is devoted to realizing Andrew Leicester's artistic vision?

HB: Yes, the project is on budget and schedule.

The Construction Authority has recently expanded Skanska's scope to include design and construction of retaining walls on either side of the bridge, which originally was part of the next contractor's responsibility. Skanska is able to complete this task within their original contractual timeframe. This will allow continuity in design, as well as afford a more complete project at the time Skanska turns the project over to the Construction Authority in December of this year.

Regarding cost, the Construction Authority originally estimated the cost for the bridge to be more, nearly \$25 million. This was based on an independent estimate. Skanska bid the project at \$18.6 million. Skanska's bid included the design and construction of the structure, including Andrew's public art concept. It also included the cost of hiring artist Andrew Leicester to continue with the project as it moved from concept through design, and then through construction. In total, we estimate that the custom architectural elements of the bridge make up approximately five percent of the total cost of the bridge, about \$1 million. As a part of the overall Foothill Extension project (including the bridge), public art makes up about ½ of one percent of the budget, which is in accordance with federal standards.

Q: Explain your role at the Construction Authority and your role in the Gold Line Bridge project specifically.

HB: The Construction Authority is an independent transportation planning and construction agency. Our sole purpose is to plan, design and build the Gold Line light rail line from LA's Union Station to Montclair. We are completing the project in three segments. My role is to oversee all phases of development for the segments and to manage a team of about a dozen full-time staff. I also work with the board of directors to set policy for the agency.

We are a small and nimble agency, which helps us be successful. We keep our overall design standard to keep costs down; and we use art elements to individualize the stations and other key project elements like the Gold Line Bridge. We are also very community focused. For that reason, we bring our artists in early so they can work with the community in developing their designs. That also allows the artist designs to be more easily integrated into the engineering for the project. The design is in place before the engineering, rather than having to fit it in after the fact. That is what we have done on the Gold Line Bridge project, as well as with the station art, and I believe it has helped keep costs down while keeping the line unique and interesting for users and neighbors.

Q: What is the Construction Authority's philosophy for the public art program?

HB: The Construction Authority's vision has always been to execute a cost effective design strategy. We employ a standard set of architectural elements to act as the baseline and allow the art to be the visual overlay that provides the unique character of the project. Our philosophy is that the art should be an integral part of our projects, and it should represent the uniqueness of the area's history and culture.

In general terms, that has translated to about one half of one percent of the overall construction cost going to public art.

Q: What was your vision for the Gold Line Bridge?

HB: I wanted the bridge to be sculptural, not just an embellished structure. I wanted to create something fantastic, something never done before. I wanted the artist to address the landscape—the mountains—as well as the community and its history and culture. Ultimately, I wanted to meld art and the transit experience, and I think we did that.

As a team, we re-imagined the construction process, bringing an artist on board from the beginning to steer the design rather than having the architects and engineers steer the art. We wanted the bridge to represent the entire area—the San Gabriel Valley, the foothills that surround it, the indigenous peoples. It needed to be organic and well-rounded, not mechanical and high tech.

Q: Who are the different groups involved with making the Gold Line Bridge a reality and how were they successful?

HB: This was a truly collaborative process. It included the community who selected the artist; staff from multiple agencies that shared the vision of the sculptural design and allowed Andrew, the artist, to think outside the box girder; our board of directors who supported that vision; and the design-build team that made it happen.

In terms of the design-build team, we went through 14 months of intense design efforts led by AECOM, the engineering consultant hired by Skanska USA. Their task was to balance the extensive structural requirements mandated by the Construction Authority, Caltrans and Metro; the constructability needs of Skanska; and the Construction Authority's unique design vision for the project developed by public artist Andrew Leicester.

Of course, overseeing the design and construction was Skanska's responsibility. They have done an outstanding job of keeping the project moving on time and on budget, and delivering work that is consistently of excellent quality and craftsmanship. They also worked closely and communicated well with the community through the process.

We were successful because of this collaboration and because we were proactive. Having the right chemistry made coordinating and planning easier, especially with all the stakeholders working together. We learned much can be accomplished, very economically, with early planning and the community's support.

Q: Talk about the design process. What was unique about the process?

HB: Our approach was very different in that the art inspired the engineering and not vice versa. We wanted an artist to create the sculptural form for the bridge from the start, not have the art be an afterthought.

Organizing the design process this way enabled us to be more fluid, allowing the design to develop organically. This was a collaborative effort that required many long, thought-provoking conversations.

In the end, there was a lot of experimentation by Andrew Leicester, the project's design concept advisor, as he developed his design. He needed to be very flexible. However, Andrew understood that his design needed to be equally functional and beautiful. In all, more than a dozen different design concepts were considered before the final one was determined, and Andrew was required to go back to the drawing board on numerous occasions. Ultimately, the design was forged from a thorough process that included the artist, the engineers, the builder and multiple public agencies.

Q: What criteria were used to select an artist?

HB: The Construction Authority uses a community-based process for selecting artists for our projects. For the Gold Line Bridge, we conducted a national search and asked community members throughout the Foothill Extension corridor to participate on an Art Design Review Committee to select the artist. It was important that the review committee represented the diversity of community stakeholders along the corridor and that they participated in the artist selection while also understanding that they would not actually be designing the bridge. In the end, the community really got behind the project and bought in to what we were trying to do and who was the right artist for the job.

Professional qualifications for those seeking the design contract were extensive. The Construction Authority required the artists to provide substantial information for the committee about their artistic merit; vision and approach to the design development process; and ability to work with many bureaucracies and government agencies as well as engineers, design professionals, and the community. They needed to have experience working with large transit projects (over \$5 million), and ideally, have experience working with Caltrans and government agencies. Most of all, we wanted an artist who could speak to the needs of the community and who knew how to connect with the physical space and its history. Andrew was selected unanimously by the committee, and he was an excellent choice.

Q: How does public art serve the community? What kind of impact can art have on public transit?

HB: Public art makes the whole transit experience more memorable and enjoyable. It's a statement of where you are. In the case of the bridge, the structure reflects the region's unique cultural history. It tells a story.

The visual quality of the nation's transit systems has a profound impact on transit patrons and the community at large. Quality art and design can improve appearance, give vibrancy to a space, and make motorists and passengers feel welcome. Every transit system should be a positive symbol for a region and its residents.

Q: What does the Gold Line Bridge mean to you personally?

HB: For me, it's an approach to do something no one in this region has ever seen or done before. Hundreds of thousands of people pass by the bridge daily, and I think they will appreciate the time and attention we gave to its design.

There were those who didn't believe we could build the bridge with a limited budget, let alone create something unique and fantastic. But, with the right mix of creativity, inspiration and planning we accomplished our goal.

To me, the Gold Line Bridge represents an interaction between the built environment and the people who pass through that environment. I'm lucky to be part of an organization that shares that vision to improve public space. I believe this piece of inspired infrastructure changes the quality of life for everyone who experiences it. I'm proud of that. Through the work we've done, we've been able to contribute to a cultural legacy for the region and its citizens, and we were able to do it better and more efficiently than ever done before.

###