

Bridges & Tunnels in the Nation's Largest City: An Interview with MTA's Martha Walther

Editor's Note: Martha Walther is the acting president of Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Bridges and Tunnels, a state agency that operates toll facilities, seven bridges and two tunnels in New York City. In this interview, Walther describes how maintaining effective SH&E practices throughout the agency's operations contributes to positive return on investment and to consistently low lost-time injury rates.

Describe MTA Bridges and Tunnels' SH&E staffing and resources and how the agency promotes SH&E practices among its employees and customers.

MTA Bridges and Tunnels (B&T) has a health and safety department (H&S) of 10 people that is headed by the chief H&S officer who reports directly to the president. However, safety is an integral part of the entire organization, and it is considered to be everyone's job.

For example, field departments such as operations and maintenance meet regularly to discuss safety issues, and all of the supervisors perform facility safety audits on every tour. To promote the safety of our customers, B&T has a dedicated unit of officers who enforce road-

way safety regulations. Drunk driving is also a strategic safety focus. B&T averages more than two driving-while-intoxicated (DWI) arrests everyday. The H&S group facilitates cooperative efforts in all departments to achieve the agency's mission for safety improvement, including training oversight, employee incentives like safety lunches and slogan contests and planning highway/jobsite safety improvements for customers and contractors.

As acting president of the agency, what do you believe is MTA B&T's philosophy regarding SH&E investment and return on investment? How is this philosophy integrated into the agency's strategic goals and objectives?

Safety is one of the agency's three strategic goals, and as such, it is the object of intense management focus. It is part of our mission statement, and managers are rated on their safety performance in their annual performance evaluation. As a public service agency, public safety is embedded in our mission, and the return on investment with respect to safety is priceless.

How are management and employees at MTA B&T trained to address SH&E issues that affect both employees and customers?

All employees attend safety training courses appropriate for their positions, which helps to instill the importance of safety. The training reinforces that safety is everyone's job, and it is critical to develop safety awareness and communication as part of the job. This is stressed at separate facility safety committee meetings and through annual right-to-know classes for all employees. It is also reinforced by individual employees who conduct "brown bag" presentations during a designated lunch hour to discuss lessons

learned or safety improvements made on a particular project or process.

MTA B&T is one of the nation's largest bridge and tunnel toll authorities with respect to traffic volume. It operates seven bridges and two tunnels, and it also provides surplus toll revenues to support public transit. How does the agency ensure that SH&E practices are maintained in an operation of this magnitude? Do you feel that effective SH&E management influences toll revenues?

We are always evaluating our program and making changes accordingly. Keeping employees and our customers safe directly impacts toll revenues. And keeping accident rates low keeps insurance claims low, which in turn keeps employees working with less time off. Moving our customers through our facilities safely is important in retaining them and helps the entire safety culture. Safety responsibilities are pushed down into the chain of command for facility operations. With each level in the command structure, there is responsibility for the safety of those whom they supervise. A commitment to safety improves job performance, commitment and professionalism. This has a clear positive impact on customer service.

We also use minimal incentives to build team participation at facilities and in departments. Based on the number of personnel in a work group, lunch is provided to groups that achieve "zero" goals for a specified period of time. For example, a large facility working 24/7 will have lunch served on all shifts if they work 90 days without a lost-time injury. It fosters team building at facilities, inter-facility competition and creative use of limited funds to serve the culture of safety reinforcement.

The H&S Dept. awards annual traveling trophies, one for the "most improved" group and one for the "best" group. The department also conducts a slogan contest each year in which individual winners receive U.S. savings bonds, and their slogan is used in safety promotions through-

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Martha Walther has 17 years' experience in transportation management and is a former Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. Marines. She is the acting president of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Bridges and Tunnels in New York. This state agency operates toll facilities, seven bridges and two tunnels in New

York City. Walther began her career at MTA Bridges and Tunnels in 1988 as director of facilities management. In this position, she decentralized management and established a professional management structure at each crossing. After being called to active duty in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, Walther returned to the agency and was appointed chief of internal security in 1991. In 2000, she became vice president of operations, overseeing a workforce of 1,200.

Walther is a graduate of John Carroll University in Ohio and holds three master's degrees—one in public administration from the Kennedy School of Harvard University, one in criminal justice from John Jay College in New York City and one in business administration from Webster University.

She served for 20 years in the U.S. Marine Corps and took on active-duty assignments in Texas, California and Japan. She also served in the Marine Corps Reserve and was a member of the Sixth Communication Battalion in Bronx, New York, until her retirement in 2003.

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out the year. Their slogan also appears on banners that are hung at each facility.

ASSE members maintain that safety is a component of an organization's overall business objective and that both injury metrics and leading indicators are identified and measured during the evaluation process. What methods do MTA B&T use to measure its injury and incident rates?

B&T defines its lost-time injuries on duty (IODs) by OSHA standards. For overall agency goals, the primary metric is the frequency calculation of lost-time injuries per 200,000 hours worked. This rate is an accurate measure and an excellent indicator over time. While the agency uses the recognized government process as an indicator, the H&S Dept. generates the monthly metric reports and works with individual departments/facilities where a particular need is identified to achieve the overall agency goal of reducing the number of lost-time injuries that occur at work annually.

What is MTA B&T's ROI with respect to SH&E management?

Part of this answer is the overall reduction in reserves set aside each year since we began this safety initiative. The Law Dept. manages reduction in the cost of injury numbers. They note that B&T has the lowest in the MTA family. In 1993, the year before MTA B&T initiated its safety improvement program, B&T incurred a total of 478 lost-time injuries. Over the last six years, B&T has averaged 53 lost-time injuries, including a low of 41 in 2004. We estimate the ROI on SH&E management to be approximately \$2.1 million per year in current dollars.

What steps has MTA B&T taken to improve safety among its employees and customers in light of recent terrorist attacks within public transportation systems in other countries?

B&T has significantly increased its number of officers and supervisors and has given them important security functions that did not exist prior to Sept. 11, 2001. It also modernized officer equipment and training modeled after New York City Police Dept. standards. B&T customers appreciate these improvements, and they have given the agency high marks for safety, security and overall performance in sur-

veys. Behind the scenes, the agency has created a command center structure that includes state-of-the-art monitoring equipment in a centralized location. This elite unit operates 24/7, drills with other local response agencies and with our facilities, and has the ability to operate from mobile locations as well.

What are your personal views on compliance with existing state and federal public transportation laws?

B&T aggressively enforces laws that are intended to foster the safety of employees and the motoring public. Best business practices are adopted to include compliance with all state and federal requirements for safe operation of our facilities. We also benefit from a committed workforce who shares pride of ownership for their service.

MTA's most recent capital program has generated an average of 31,760 private-sector jobs, \$1.3 billion in wages, \$100 million in state and local tax revenues and \$3.52 billion in economic activity annually. What kind of ROI has MTA B&T received as a result of this capital program?

The overriding goal of B&T's capital program is to keep its bridges and tunnels structurally sound. Its seven bridges and two tunnels form essential links for vehicular highway transportation in the New York City metropolitan region, while providing significant financial support for mass transit. On an average day, more than 800,000 vehicles use the nine crossings, which generates more than \$1.2 billion in annual toll revenue.

With nearly two-thirds of this toll revenue dedicated to mass transit, B&T performs a unique and vital function on behalf of regional mobility. Without the critical capital investments that are part of the MTA capital program (including more than \$1 billion for B&T over the 2000-2004 period and more than \$1.1 billion planned for 2005-2009), B&T's ongoing ability to accommodate the current level of traffic and to generate the resulting income would be severely jeopardized. In addition, the ongoing capital investments ensure that Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (TBTA) bonds continue to be highly rated by the financial industry. These high ratings result in lower debt service costs not only for B&T, but also for its sister mass-transit agencies in the MTA.

One of the most significant business-of-safety-related issues ASSE members face is the impact of the multilanguage workplace on SH&E performance.

How does MTA B&T address this issue among its management, employees and customers?

New York City is extremely diverse in its population. B&T works hard to have a workforce that reflects the city's diversity in its recruitment strategies. When there are facility issues that require a language that is not spoken in the workplace, other government agencies have resources that we use for translation. Fortunately, if there is a distressed motorist requiring non-English-speaking assistance, our officers usually have the language resources and adequate translating skills to assist.

Bridges and tunnels are a challenging SH&E issue because they include hazards and exposures that are related to both engineering and technology. What type of risk assessment methodology does your agency use to evaluate your bridge and tunnel programs? How has this methodology been implemented in past projects?

The chief H&S officer addresses each new class of employees, so new employees are introduced to the concept of working in a hazardous environment on their first day, and if they cannot work safely, they will not have a job. In addition, each capital project and every major maintenance project includes a safety representative from the department to facilitate compliance with SH&E requirements. The team will also include the project engineer, a contract manager and possibly a legal advisor as well as operations personnel to ensure that contractors safely perform the work for which they are contracted to protect employees, customers and the environment.

The term "hazardous materials" was recently added to the dictionary even though SH&E professionals have worked with these materials for decades. As head of a major transportation-related agency, how do you address the issue of hazardous materials in confined space areas such as tunnels?

We have policies and procedures for written risk assessments for hazardous materials, and as the in-house advisors for all facilities, H&S provides the technical guidance for the evaluation and administration to identify and require appropriate

equipment/supplies for all hazardous materials. All MSDS are reviewed prior to purchase, and hazardous materials are used only by qualified individuals—mostly outside contractors, who are trained in the proper use, protection and emergency responses that might be required. In addition, agency rules restrict some vehicle types and some materials from transport through the tunnels, and they are restricted to New York City-approved routes when shipped. As you can see, we operate in a truly collaborative environment.

In your position, you are responsible for major transportation infrastructure as well as for public policy issues. What cost-benefit analysis does your agency use when looking at SH&E-related expenditures?

Investments in B&T's infrastructure are primarily made through the capital program. Safety-related capital projects go through the same review process as all other capital projects before they are included in the five-year program. The process is multidisciplinary in that a cross-section of the agency, including the chief financial officer, the chief engineer, the chief health and safety officer and the vice president of operations serve as the capital review committee, which makes recommendations to the president regarding the projects to be included in the program.

Among the committee's considerations are the cost of the project, the ability to stage the work in a way that allows traffic to safely traverse the facility, the operating budget impacts of the capital investment and the expected benefits, including the useful life of the completed projects. In addition, once a project is included in the program, alternative analyses are carried out whenever appropriate to help to ensure that both safety and cost-effectiveness issues are revisited as the project progresses.

As the head of a major government agency, much, if not most, of your funding is often outside of your control. How do you "sell" SH&E to interested stakeholder groups?

B&T generates its own funding from toll-collection operations. However, safety is an MTA-wide strategic goal that has strong support from all of its stakeholder groups. After 10 years of continued improvement, we continue to reinforce our policies to assure our continued success.

Historically, your agency has supported professional organizations such as the ASSE. How do you believe government agencies such as yours will cooperate with professional safety organizations in the future with respect to policy issues?

The chief H&S officer tries to lead by example and chooses to invest in her

employees through support of ASSE's activities. As a public agency, it is often difficult to justify expenditures for travel. We have, however, continued to participate locally to encourage the growth of technical expertise in the transportation safety arena. The involvement with others in the field makes working together for customer and employee safety easier for all team participants.

What do you believe is the single most important SH&E issue you address as head of a government agency?

The single most important safety issue is to instill a culture of safety day in and day out, in large-scale and in small-scale issues. The cumulative effect of promoting safety awareness among all employees provides a safety context for all actions and decision making. B&T has been able to instill this culture, and its challenge is to keep it fresh by communicating our commitment to safety in new ways to employees and customers. This is especially critical in the challenging security environment of the last four years. With the addition of more than 500 new officers, getting "back to basics" is an ongoing endeavor, and we must continue to reinforce the idea that everyone is responsible for safety. ■