National Park Service
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Park Roads & Parkways Program
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Meet The Team: CAPT A. Mark Anderson

The Park Roads and Parkways Program's Mark Anderson isn't your typical engineer. In fact, he considers himself a communicator first, and an engineer second. "Back in high school and college, I thought I was going to be an engineer, but my vision of what an engineer does was completely different than the reality," says Mark.

"In high school and college, almost all engineers are nearly clueless as to how to be an engineer. They're great at figuring out solutions to problems, but almost all of them fail to understand that engineering solutions are useless without the people. Engineers like to design things that would work really well in a vacuum, without any humans."

Mark sees his role at PRPP as that of a coordinator first, and then an engineer. "My job is to coordinate among the regions, among the divisions, with Federal Highways," he says. "I'm like glue: I kind of pull the program together and make

Mark Anderson works with the National Park Service Park Roads & Parkways Program, but he wears the uniform of a Public Health Officer. He has served with the Public Health Service for 24 years.

sure that people communicate with one another about the things that are going on."

Mark has been serving as that "glue" for eight-and-a-half years, when he came from Alaska to D.C., following his wife's promotion to a position in the Indian Health Service. "I'd been meeting with some people in the NPS, and I sat down with Mark Hartsoe," Mark recalls. "We immediately saw eye-to-eye, and had some similar ideas and views on things. He just asked me when I could start working."

Another thing about Mark that you'll notice is that his uniform doesn't look like standard NPS issue. That's because he's a Captain in the Public Health Service with 24 years of service, the last 8-plus working through an MOA with the NPS.

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"Lots of people don't know that the NPS has the longest existing MOA in the federal government" said Mark. "In 1921 Stephen Mather the first Director of the NPS)and the Surgeon General (head of the Public Health Service) first assigned a public health service sanitary engineer to the National Park Service; that's only five years after the NPS started. Our long-standing MOU with Federal Highways was signed the next year."

Mark added that today there are 51 PHS officers assigned to the Department of the Interior, and 44 of them are serving at the NPS. These include three physicians, one physician's assistant, two nurses, fourteen environmental health officers (sanitarians: food safety, wells, water/sewer systems), and twenty-three engineers.

"I think the PRPP program is set up really well," Mark said. "The program can adapt and be adapted to each of the particular transportation needs of the NPS' seven regions. None of the regions has exactly the same needs, due either to geographic differences, socioeconomic differences, different characteristics of parks, or different patterns of usage."

Mark sees incorporating regional input as a key factor in the success of the PRP program. "The local people are on the ground in that region, and they have a better idea of what

is needed for transportation in that region than anyone in Washington ever would. So we try to set up some limits, and let the local people adapt the program to their local needs, while still staying within the bounds of the policies that guide the national program. I think it's very successful."

Mark thinks his approach with the PRP program is based on his having come from the field. "I spent 15 years before coming here working as a project manager and as a program manager in an Indian Health Service region, supervising engineers doing planning and design and construction," he says. "So my bias is always that when it comes to technical solutions for transportation problems or engineering problems, you're better off going to the local folks, and then doing what you can on a national front to support those local folks. And then those local people do their best to support the national program, often by providing information back to the national office."

Mark notes that WASO often gets questions on Friday afternoon that are due Monday morning, and he's often dependent on getting answers to those questions from regional staff. "We try to anticipate what questions might possibly be coming up, and then we get data and reports prepared ahead of time," he says. "More often than not we're successful with that approach, but sometimes they catch us with a blind-side question. That's when we turn to the field."

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Mark says he learned fairly quickly after getting out of college that one of the most important things engineers can do is learn to communicate. "You've got to determine what people's and communities' needs are. If you can't figure out those needs, you don't have an engineering problem to solve. So, if you like to solve engineering problems, you've got to communicate with people."

"The whole purpose of engineering is to adapt technology to solve problems for people," he adds. "Most people who

go into engineering usually want to avoid people and politics; they just want to get on their high-powered computers and calculate out their solutions to the 17th decimal place. They fail to understand that the purpose of engineering is to serve the people."

Mark says the thing he enjoys most about working with the transportation program is when he gets to work with all of the people involved in the program. "I really enjoy working with the dedicated folks at the NPS and Federal Highways. Our joint meetings are as much a reward to me as they are a challenge sometimes. [During those meetings] we are encouraging folks to put their national hats on, and they do it. I think that ability of everyone to put differences aside and work through issues and any kind of problems that exist out there is the biggest thing that keeps the program running so smoothly and so well."

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Mark says another key part of his duties is to monitor the NPS transportation program budget and the national program obligations; making sure that as many of the funds as possible available to the transportation program are obligated to keep projects moving ahead. "Over the last eight-and-a-half years, we've had an average obligation rate of around 99%," Mark reports. "We had a few years where it might have been only at 97%, but it's usually very high."

Mark says he's learned a lot by taking the time to listen to others in the Park Service and other agencies. "When I came to the NPS, I learned quickly that I was not going to be able to do this job with just one mentor. There have been a lot of people who served as mentors as I came up to speed on the PRP program, and because I had such good mentors, I was able to come up to speed pretty quickly."

"My primary mentor has been Mark Hartsoe," Mark said. "He has brilliant political acumen; it's almost a natural with him. Almost all engineers hate politics…they think it's

something they can avoid. Whenever I'm talking to engineers, particularly young ones, I encourage them to learn about politics, because politics is the way that non-engineers make decisions."

Mark added that each of the NPS's Regional FLHP coordinators has also served as a mentor in one way or another. "I try to learn from everybody: here in our group, from Jim Evans and Tom Canick, from Jeff Mann and Darcel Collins at Federal Highways, and from the folks in the Division offices. When I was starting, these people had patience; they listened to and answered a lot of my stupid questions. They were always willing to share their opinions and advice. It's why we still have a pretty good working relationship. They're willing to share their advice, and I'm willing to listen to it, because I'm the first person to admit that I don't know everything."

When he's not in the offices, Mark likes to travel with his family to historic sites. "We've been doing that pretty constantly since we came to DC eight-and-a-half years ago," he says. "One of my sons is extremely interested in historic sites, and a lot of those are National Park areas. We really like to hike; the spring is difficult for us because the pollen counts are so high, and both my sons have severe hay fever from tree pollen. So that crimps our style a bit for hiking."

The tree pollen will become less of an issue in the very near future. Mark and his family are in the process of moving back to Alaska, but he'll be retaining his position with the PRP program.

"A lot of the important things I do I accomplish over the phone and via e-mail," Mark says. "These are the tasks that are part of the day-to-day coordination of the PRP program; they're focused at the region level and at the parks level." I'm encouraging people to think of it as me teleworking, just from a longer distance," he adds. "My current strategy is to key my work day to the Denver time zone, so I'll start work around 6 a.m. in Alaska, which is 10 a.m. East Coast time, and 8 a.m. Denver time. So that should work out pretty well."

"Working with and for the National Park Service and all the people has been a blast," says Mark. "It's very rewarding and enlightening. I am constantly reinvigorated by the enthusiasm that everyone I work with has for the parks and the National Park Service.