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## Associate Administrator's Corner

FTA's **Office of Research, Demonstration and Innovation**

welcomed Karina Ricks in September 2021 to replace long-term Associate Administrator Vince Valdez.

Karina is no stranger to public service, as she has spent a good portion of her career working in municipal government agencies and a brief time at the Federal level. She started her career as a Presidential Management Fellow at the EPA, researching how transportation and land use policies affect low-income, minority, and disenfranchised communities and providing technical assistance and outreach to communities. Uniquely, she spent 1.5 years of her 2-year fellowship working outside of federal government, first detailed to the National Neighborhood Coalition and then to the District of Columbia's Office of Planning. It was this intimate experience with neighborhood leaders as the city struggled to find stability after turbulent decades that made her realize she really relished the work of local government. "I enjoyed the work at EPA, but I wanted to get my hands dirty and be a doer."



Karina served in the government of the District of Columbia first as a Neighborhood Planner and TOD Coordinator in the Office of Planning and then moved to the Department of Transportation to lead the Great Streets Initiative and later serving as Associate Director for Transportation Planning and Policy for six years. During this time, she was instrumental in launching the DC Circulator and Capital Bikeshare, introducing carsharing and curbside electric vehicle charging; implementing performance-based parking management; redeveloping Columbia Heights, NoMA, H Street NE, and the Anacostia Waterfront; and starting GoDCgo, the city's transportation demand management program. Through her work at the local government level, she learned how pivotal transportation could be in transforming communities. "Transportation is the foundation for everything—it is at the root of social issues, it is the common thread that connects the city."

After more than a decade, Karina left city service to establish the Mid Atlantic office of Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates, a planning and transportation firm. As Principal, Board Member, and Multimodal Sector Lead, she led multidisciplinary teams of planners and engineers developing plans and designs of all types, including regional transit plans for Detroit and New Orleans, transportation master plans for Seattle and Washington DC, street design guides for Toronto and Ann Arbor, organizational strategic plans for Portland and Chicago, and Smart City proposals for Austin and Columbus, among other activities.

Karina was lured back to public service by Pittsburgh's Mayor William Peduto, who asked her to establish a new Department of Mobility and Infrastructure to address legacy infrastructure needs while building mobility for the future. She set as the mission of this new organization to "provide the physical mobility necessary for the economic mobility of all city residents." During her tenure, the city addressed many maintenance backlogs, established the first-ever critical sidewalk gap program, doubled on-street bicycle facilities, deployed a network of smart signals that support transit operations, introduced a Vision Zero strategy, created a new emphasis area to mitigate landslide and flooding impacts of climate change, modernized public street permitting and utility coordination, and established Pittsburgh as a leader in shared and autonomous vehicle policy.

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Karina comes to FTA at what she deems an unprecedented moment in transit. “With the passing of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the top-notch leadership at DOT and all offices of FTA,” she says, “we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve transit to meet today’s needs and truly move the masses.”

This perspective shapes Karina’s outlook on the direction of FTA Research. “The innovation should be in service to the long-term sustainability of public transportation,” she says about her vision for the research office. “We must prepare and influence the transit industry to meet a changing future. Simply put, nothing beats public transportation for efficiency and equity.”

Karina believes the Office of Research should not be the only cradle of innovation in FTA. “Everyone in the agency is an innovator, not just the folks in TRI.” She looks forward to cultivating and capturing those ideas from across the Administration and building strong partnerships that leverage diverse knowledge and experiences.