

# Whose Ethics?

By Jason DeGray, P.E., PTOE



**Jason DeGray, P.E., PTOE** is a member of ITE's Advocacy Committee and also serves as Senior Director for the New England Section. Since 2013, Jason has moderated a series of roundtable discussions regarding the current transportation revolution. These sessions focus on cultivating an institutional understanding of what a nation of declining vehicle miles traveled per capita means for ITE and our relevancy, exploring ITE's ethical responsibility as the professional voice of the transportation industry to advocate for sustainable, active transportation priorities, and to contemplate the nimbleness of our Institute to respond appropriately to this changing landscape. Look for future sessions at upcoming ITE meetings and as ITE Advocacy Committee sponsored webinars. Jason holds a master of science degree in transportation engineering from the University of Massachusetts and has 13 years of experience in the transportation planning and engineering fields in both the public and private sectors. Currently he works as a project manager for Greenman-Pedersen, Inc. in Wilmington, MA, USA. Jason can be reached at [jdegray@gpinet.com](mailto:jdegray@gpinet.com).

Transportation engineering is a numbers game. LOS, ADT, V/C, crash rate, K factor, lane and shoulder widths, clear zone, etc. These are the current variables of our profession's values based engineering system and they mandate a bias to one set of users. This system was established as an architecture for suburbia, and the fate of our profession resides with it as long as we adhere to it. The alternative is to proactively choose to advocate for a new vision. If ITE were to be nimble enough, we could pivot and fill a palpable leadership void, one worthy of the honor and dignity of the Institute. For this to happen though we will need to undergo a period of dramatic growth. This Institute needs to make a choice about its future and come of age. This is a values based discussion. But how do you effectively discuss values?

A case study arose last month which afforded an opportunity. You may have seen it under the topic, Just Another Pedestrian Killed, on the ITE Community All Member Forum (<http://bit.ly/1CLonqz>). Of debate was the ethical responsibility of the engineer in the decision to provide a crosswalk traversing a four lane roadway between a noted, urban public library and its parking lot directly across the street. This set against the backdrop of the death of a seven-year-old child.

What ensued was both frenetic and cathartic. Many pointed out the challenges of navigating the political and social climates in which we operate, but few seemed comfortable defining an ethical responsibility. Some deflected the ethical question by asserting that transportation engineers should serve only as the tool by which public policy is implemented. We, without bias, implement and guide investment in line with endorsed policy plans, standards, and legislation. While this line of reasoning does remove all culpability from the profession, I am not sure it satisfies ITE's Canons of Ethics, which prescribes we

use professional knowledge and skill for the advancement of human welfare. The problem is that while engineers may not be experts in values, we can certainly educate the public discourse as to the results of "values" based investment over time. We choose not to. This is where we lose the ethical argument. Conventional values for a number of decades promoted auto-based development in support of the narrative of a suburban ideal which allured the collective vision of the nation. Yet now we can measure the impact of these choices on public health, the environment, and civic finances. Are we not allowed to leverage these findings? Would the decision regarding the crosswalk on State Street in the example above have been different if we accounted for these factors?

Does the suburban narrative still prevail as the American ideal? Perhaps, but it certainly doesn't sit alone as it once did. A more urban American narrative is emerging, complete with its own values set, and the rate at which the American populous is choosing it accelerates every day. There are many that believe the suburban experiment is unsustainable in its current form. I certainly do. The economic model simply cannot address the maintenance liability all of this infrastructure represents. A daunting thing to realize, but it is a fundamental truth that needs to be reconciled. We are unwittingly fragile. What is more, the new economy is forming and we are not a part of it. This new paradigm is redefining the optimum economy of scale along with the underlying prescribed values which support it. These values call for a robust transportation system that is truly embracing of all, promotes safety and social equity, acknowledges environmental realities, and strives to be sustainable.

There is a group of transportation professionals scattered among various fields and organizations that are searching for means to

coalesce around this new vision. Could ITE be the conduit? Certainly, but it would require standing the system on its head, a move ITE has shown little capacity to undertake.

The current evolution of the transportation system does not represent an outward expansion, a first for us. Rather, this is a large scale revitalization project. These projects are predicated upon sound design, linking form and function uniquely as each specific place requires. There are no equations which can be dogmatically applied. We need an entirely new system, one that is nimble, can speak in a number of different languages, and truly respects context.

Yet we still play the numbers game. We seem to think we can hedge our bets and operate as if both the old and the new paradigms are of equal footing. Our current philosophy seems to be to just tweak the equations to fit our needs, not recognizing that it is this very approach that needs to change. The problem with the numbers game is that it breeds more numbers games. Those who owe their careers to the numbers will find it much easier to abide in them than to reject them. This is the pitfall of a bureaucracy, when the system needs to change only bold leadership will suffice.

ITE's Canons of Ethics requires each member to uphold and advance the honor and dignity of the profession. How depends upon the values which underlie our ethical understanding of the world. Whose do we choose? Engineering Ethics. Read one way this phrase implies the moral principles that guide our profession. I find it more interesting though to consider engineering to be a verb. In which case the syntax insinuates the act of design reflecting values relating to human conduct. The rightness and wrongness of certain actions. This is what we do, and we need to acknowledge values change as society does. And if you agree with that, I suggest you make your voice heard, lest this organization continue to be a passive observer of its own demise. The Institute needs you. [itej](#)

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Evolving the Firm: Meeting the Needs of a 21st Century Economy and Workforce

To the Editor:

I found the article in the January 2015 edition of *ITE Journal* on the evolution of the workplace for the 21st century both informative and provocative. It provided plenty of innovative ideas about how the transportation industry can increase its effectiveness and creativity. However, the article blurred the line between information and advertisement. I counted eight instances in which the phrase, "at Sanderson Stewart" was used, as well as several other places where the firm's name was invoked. A sidebar touted the firm's achievements. I would have preferred an article that was more about the innovations and less about the firm promoting them. An occasional reference to the firm was all that was needed...we'd get the picture. That would have made the piece more appropriate for a technical journal and less of a commercial.

William Lieberman, Transportation Consultant

### Editors' Response:

Thank you for your letter. While this article was not standard technical journal content, we are pleased you found it informative and provocative. In an effort to share the firm's innovations without creating a promotional marketing piece, we decided that being specific to the firm's actions and the awards received as a result lend to their credibility and could not be omitted. The sidebar was intended to put the author's workplace recommendations into context with the high level of recognition the firm received across all industries without interrupting the narrative. [itej](#)

## WHERE IN THE WORLD?

When *ITE Journal* was redesigned, we heard from many of our members that they missed the cover photos and trying to guess where the images were taken. Some members even had contests with each other. To bring back this tradition, we have added a "Where in the World?" photo to each issue. The answer is on page 28. Feel free to send in your own photos to [msaglam@ite.org](mailto:msaglam@ite.org). Good luck! [itej](#)

