

Fairfax County's next generation of public works engineers

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***"P**ublic works organizations need to find creative ways to reinvent and renew themselves constantly – new ideas and new perspectives are needed to address ever-evolving challenges." – James Patteson, Director, Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services*

Fairfax County's Public Works Department, much like similar departments across the country, is facing a major succession challenge, with more than 50 percent of employees in some areas of the organization reaching retirement age in the next three to five years. This mass exodus is creating a "brain drain" on institutional knowledge. Public Works Director James Patteson said, "My organization has enjoyed a lot of success over the last couple decades, but past successes do not guarantee

future success and we need to ensure we are developing future leaders to move the organization forward. These future leaders are not developed overnight, and a longer term strategy needs to be in place to recruit and develop talent. New thinking and new ways to engage the community's changing demographics are needed."

Suzy Stasulis, an engineer in the stormwater planning division of Fairfax County's Department of Public Works and Environmental Services, always knew she wanted to work on infrastructure projects involving water, but she had never considered working for a public entity. That view changed after a participant from the department's Professional Engineer Development Program visited her municipal engineering class at Virginia Tech. Stasulis' career path became clearer later in the semester when department director Patteson mentored a group project for the course. "It was encouraging to meet different people associated with DPWES who had such positive outlooks on the organization," said Stasulis.

Upon graduating in 2012, Stasulis was hired in the program and now helps the county meet water quality standards, ensures dams are safe, and monitors the flood warning system. She is one of 15 participants to come through the program since

Participants from Fairfax County's Professional Engineer Development Program presented "Get 'Em While They're Young" at the APWA Mid-Atlantic Chapter Conference in Baltimore, Md.



the first group in 2008; 12 of which still work for the department, and two more young engineers started in July. Restocking the department with young, talented engineering graduates is exactly why the Professional Engineer Development Program was created.

Patteson said, “The program has brought in a very talented group of young engineers who are already leaving their mark and are quickly developing the skills to be future leaders. These engineers have brought new ideas and a refreshing level of energy and enthusiasm to their work. The program is designed to provide cross-training across the full department and has helped bridge organizational silos and improve relationships throughout the department.”

The program is not an internship, a common misconception that program coordinator Lisa Jarrell strives to correct. New graduates are hired as full-time employees with benefits and rotate through different business areas during their first year. They start as an entry-level engineer, and at the end of their first year they are non-competitively promoted to Engineer II. Jarrell meets with participants near the



Suzy Stasulis examines an Archimedes Screw during a tour of a levee in neighboring Prince Georges County.



Professional Engineer Development Program participants learn by doing, such as in this stream restoration project.

end of their first year to find out which business area they wish to reside in as they enter their second year. Placement depends on availability, but Jarrell says she makes every effort to place the employee in their desired business area. Once placed, the participant remains in that position for three years until he/she qualifies for an Engineer III position, at which time he/she receives a non-competitive promotion.

Patteson said, “Public works organizations need to find creative ways to reinvent and renew themselves constantly—new ideas and new perspectives are needed to address ever-evolving challenges.” When recruitment for the program began in 2007, Jarrell and several engineers visited Virginia Tech, Penn State, Howard University, and University of Maryland to seek candidates. After the program was in place, participants became the recruiters, sharing their experiences with students in classes and graduates at career fairs. “The

program participants have taken real ownership of the program and its success going forward,” said Patteson.

Stasulis values campus visits and presenting the advantages of working for public works. “In general, students don’t think of working for a public entity right out of school. Most plan on working in the private sector because that’s generally what happens. To overcome that, public works departments need to meet students where they are and present a relatable image.” She suggests working with student chapters of ASCE or APWA as a new way to build relationships.

Retaining young talent hasn’t been a problem to date. When asked why they chose to pursue a career with Fairfax County, participants said they see opportunities to learn and grow and an opportunity to hit the ground running after graduation, working on exciting public improvement projects. Stasulis feels municipalities take a

more holistic perspective than private firms do because they deal with issues in perpetuity. "Problems don't just evaporate because a contract is done," she said.

Catherine Torgersen's first job out of college was with a private firm, but the idea of working on environmental change within her community drew her to the department where she now manages stormwater retrofits and stream restoration design projects. "After experiencing that side of engineering, I realized I find much greater job satisfaction working for a public entity. DPWES offers a great balance of engineering, project management, and community outreach. All of my projects require a lot of stakeholder interaction and the county also offers many opportunities to volunteer/work at public events supporting environmental education," said Torgersen. "Surrounded by

friendly and helpful coworkers and mentors, an abundance of training opportunities, and interesting and challenging projects, I look forward to an exciting government career."

Amy Linderman, a 2014 civil engineering graduate, is nearing the end of her first year in the program. She has worked with teams to prioritize stormwater pipe repairs and with inspectors reviewing building plans. "I really liked the rotational aspect of the program since I felt that I would be very stuck in one subject at a private firm. I was allowed to explore many different options," Linderman said.

Jack Meritt has been with the department for four years and said, "I chose to work for a public entity to provide engineering and construction management skills to public improvement projects and for the satisfaction of providing civil service."

As more of the workforce nears retirement age, public works departments need to begin succession planning now. Fairfax County's Professional Engineer Development Program is filling positions with talented young graduates who want to work in public works. The program continues to draw top talent because of recruitment efforts on campuses, speaking to engineering classes, having participants act as ambassadors, and creating opportunities to learn and grow with the department. The participants' skillsets and enthusiasm are rejuvenating the department and establishing a solid foundation on which to build the department for the next thirty years.

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Young engineers from the Professional Engineer Development Program display their enthusiasm for public works.