Get to Know IBTTA’s 2020 President, Samuel Johnson

Samuel is Chief Operations Officer for the Transportation Corridor Agencies in Irvine, California.

Bill Cramer, Communications Director, IBTTA, recently sat down with Samuel Johnson to learn a bit more about his background and interests.

Q: You’ve had the opportunity to view transportation and tolling through several different lenses in the course of your career. Please tell us about your various roles and how you have seen the industry grow and change?

A: I have had the pleasure of holding positions at a transit planning and development agency; a large transit operator; a large regional planning agency and now a toll road owner and operator. I’ve had the opportunity to guide intelligent transportation systems development and operation, looking at cutting edge solutions that laid the groundwork for what we are seeing come to fruition today. I’ve also had responsibility for overseeing demand management programs focused on ride sharing, incident management and traveler information systems.

The combined experience has given me a unique perspective on the varying pieces of the mobility puzzle and an appreciation for the broad challenges and opportunities the transportation industry faces. My diverse career has allowed me to see the significant shift occurring in technology, the introduction of new modes of travel, the increasing importance of tailored transit services and the acceptance of user-based fees as the best solution for providing sustainable funding for investment and sustainable value for transportation users.

Q: How long have you been a member or involved with IBTTA?

A: I became actively involved in IBTTA after attending the 2010 annual conference in San Diego. That’s where I learned that the organization’s value proposition went beyond the nuts and bolts of tolling to include the broader discussion of sustainable transportation needs. I also experienced the unique family culture of the association and how it helped to immediately build peer relationships. It made me want to learn more about the association and its offerings, and in the years since I’ve benefitted from the knowledge and thought leadership shared at conferences and participated on various committees. I was also fortunate to be selected and became a graduate of IBTTA’s Leadership Academy before being selected as Second Vice President.
Q: What is the number one benefit you and TCA receive by being a member of IBTTA?

A: I am passionate about IBTTA and think it offers several benefits that anyone involved in transportation should try to take advantage of. At the top of my list would be the peer relationships IBTTA fosters and the discussions on the global challenges the transportation industry is facing. Those topics are reflected in conference content which provides food for thought and education for attendees.

I also appreciate that the association is member-driven through the active engagement of agencies, operators, and the various industry partners from around the world who work voluntarily to improve the association and industry. The combination of peer relationships and active engagement creates a dynamic environment for thought leadership.

The IBTTA Foundation has also given me a vehicle to join hundreds of others in doing “good works”. The scholarship program identifies talented, deserving students with amazing futures, and the annual service project brings members and conference attendees together to invest time and sweat equity in a worthy cause.

Q: Please share with us your vision for the year and how your theme, The Road to Continued Excellence, fits in?

A: It is an amazing time to be in the transportation industry due to the convergence of transformative technologies that will greatly enhance safety, the rapid introduction of new service offerings that will influence vehicle ownership and business models, and the clear recognition of the need to implement a more sustainable financial model to fund transportation needs. My theme recognizes the tolling industry’s past accomplishments but is intended to direct thoughts towards laying the path for our future success in light of the massive changes ahead in this new era of transportation.

The challenges of addressing “never-ending demand” and environmentally conscious planning remain the same. But the reality of groundbreaking technologies, micro transportation services and consumer influence dictate that transportation professionals think differently about the future. The tolling industry, in particular, has to give thought to new payment models, customer changes and its solid business model of delivering and maintaining infrastructure, with the reality that money still doesn’t mean we can build our way out of congestion. Balancing these aspects in the new era may push our agencies to broader thinking and participation in the overall success of mobility, with user fees playing a central role.
Q: What do you see as the two or three biggest opportunities or challenges facing surface transportation today?

A: One of the big opportunities I see is our industry adjusting to the demand for consumer convenience, driven by the Mobility-as-a-Service concept and changes in vehicle ownership. This may create a new business role in the industry for a data aggregator and reservation manager who can identify the best mobility combination for a trip, reserve seats and/or devices and provide a single point of payment for the entire journey. These aggregator-managers may become some of largest account holders for tolling agencies, which could simplify administration while changing our approach to customer communication.

Autonomous vehicles and changes in ownership models could result in increased usage of toll facilities as service providers look to optimize their asset investments by maximizing the number of customer pickups. New contra-flow trips could increase the financial profile of tolled facilities, perhaps providing opportunities for increased transportation investment.

The biggest potential challenge I see is a hyper-reaction to other industries’ use of data that could lead to privacy regulations which distort the vision for transportation. Tolling agencies have demonstrated their sound stewardship of customer data and delivered significant customer value through interoperability, allowing someone to have a single account and anonymously pay for tolls on any facility. This level of convenience requires data exchanges, and the same will be true for MaaS and aggregator-managers. Consumer privacy protection is paramount to advance technological society, and we must resist creating unreasonable roadblocks to the benefits that society can create in transportation.

The need for a more robust transit business model is another significant challenge which may be ripe with opportunities. If industry thought leaders hold true to the reality that “we can’t build our way out of congestion”, and believe in social justice, the combination of user fees to manage congestion and competitive transit services to provide choice is a logical path to balance the network and promote environmental stewardship. The solution is in finding a sound fiscal approach to make it happen.

Q: What role is IBTTA playing in building practical solutions on these issues?

A: IBTTA does a great job of facilitating member-driven thought leadership through information exchange and education; advocacy for sustainable transportation funding; and broad partnerships among the various players in the transportation industry. IBTTA has a very special ability to bring together global participants to discuss finance, safety, operations, technology, and a host of other issues, and to engage active volunteers to work toward common goals for transportation.
I am excited and proud to be selected for a leadership role in such a great organization. I look forward to working with our Board members and strategic advisors as we revisit our strategic plan and discuss thoughts on IBTTA’s role for the future and our specific objectives.

Q: What new projects or initiatives do you plan to undertake during your year as IBTTA President?

A: My plan for 2020 is to work with the Board of Directors to review and update our strategic plan and three-year tactical plan, with a keen focus on future members and leaders. The tolling industry and the association are both filled with talented, actively engaged thought leaders and technical experts with interesting stories of how they came to work in tolling. While the road to our future has not been completely mapped, it is clear that our people will drive us there. Our ability to attract, retain and develop talent is a critical component of our future success.

With this in mind, we will be launching an initiative to brand our existing efforts and round them out with some new components. The Tolling Immersion Program (TIP) will incorporate a new internship and mentoring program along with the establishment of the Young Professionals Council. The internship program will be unique, providing selected candidates a comprehensive employment program working for a public agency, and then a private firm. Coupled with our scholarship program, Tolling 101 lecture series, and the Leadership Academy, IBTTA will provide a full circle of complimentary programs to attract, retain and develop the future of our industry and the IBTTA family.

Q: What is your favorite food, book, movie, music or way to spend your free time?

A: Folks who have met me know I am not a small guy, and neither is my appetite. I am a bit of a foodie and like a variety of things, but nothing too exotic. I definitely have a weakness for ice cream shakes.

I prefer a good movie to a good book and enjoy stories that lift the human spirit through courage or sacrifice, like The Pursuit of Happiness, Remember the Titans, and Saving Private Ryan. I also enjoy movies with great underlying technology, whether animation or special effects, like The Matrix. As music genres are changing, I think my tastes are, too. As a Motown native, I definitely love hip-hop, R&B and modern jazz, but have found some country and rock that makes my foot tap. My free time is mostly driven by my passion to learn. I get interested in a lot of things and also like DIY projects, which keeps my YouTube account active, but I am perfectly comfortable watching a good movie or TV series.
I look forward to an exciting year ahead, working with my fellow executive officers, Board members, IBTTA members and other individuals and organizations outside the tolling and transportation industry who are looking to continue along a path to excellence for all customers.