

UNIVERSITY'S TRANSPORTATION

PROVIDING THE BEST CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AT USC

The University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles has endured many creative nicknames based on its initials. Spurred by recent capital construction investments and expansion, however, it can add the "University of Steady Construction" to the list, and USC Transportation finds itself right in the middle of it.

Director Tony Mazza leads a team of Associate Directors and hundreds of managers, bus drivers, Guest Service Ambassadors and student employees who strive to deliver the USC Auxiliary Services mission of always providing the best customer experience.

"As in many other university environments, members of our team are frequently the first contact a visitor has coming to campus," Mazza said. "It's imperative that their

experience be a great one, as it can set the tone for their entire visit to the university, whether as a prospective student or returning alumnus."

Alumni and others who are returning to USC may find a vastly different footprint from the one they remember, however.

"It's incredible how much the campus has changed in the 10 years I've been here, and especially so in the last few years," Mazza said. As both our main and medical campuses continue to expand by constructing new buildings, we've been challenged to keep up so those new employees have a place to park. It's like trying to solve a puzzle where the picture keeps changing."

The first new piece toward solving that parking puzzle opened in January 2016, at USC's Health Sciences Campus in East Los Angeles. The San Pablo Structure (SPS) is a 1,200-space parking facility that took 18 months and more than \$21 million to complete. McCarthy Building Cos., which has completed numerous other projects at USC, designed and built the structure.

"The San Pablo Structure was a critically needed facility," Mazza said. "The medical campus has been growing exponentially for the last few years, adding new buildings, research centers and staff, and there just hasn't been sufficient [parking] capacity to serve them. This structure is adjacent to a new student housing development that opened in July, and a future hotel site. It gives us parking capacity we've simply never had before at that campus."

Also, the USC Shrine Structure at the main University Park Campus, scheduled to open in April, will provide 1,300 new parking spaces, at a cost of \$25 million to build. Bomel Construction won the design-build bid with its unique solution for one of the site's specific challenges.

David Donovan, an Associate Director for USC Transportation and its Project Manager for both new structures, said: "The USC Shrine Structure site was so different from what we had at SPS. It's a city block long but relatively narrow, which presented its own design challenge.

"But in addition to all the other normal requirements," he said, "we also had to provide a loading dock for the historic Shrine Auditorium next door, at a specific location within the structure, large enough for four semi-trailers to use at the same time. The design we chose included a mezzanine parking level around the loading dock area that allowed us to actually lower the overall height of the facility, while still providing the parking we needed."

While USC Transportation is in the process of spending nearly \$50 million for two additional parking structures, the university itself is spending more than \$1 billion to change its main campus outline. The USC Village project, also scheduled to open this year, is simultaneously developing



The USC Parking Customer Service Team: From left to right are Michelle Garcia, Director Tony Mazza, Gabe Badillo, David Donovan and Chris Wilson.

DEPARTMENT UP TO CHALLENGE

15 acres of land that USC owns north of the current campus into 1.25 million square feet of residential and retail space.

It is the largest development in the history of USC, and one of the largest ever in Los Angeles, employing thousands of workers during the three-year construction phase, and hundreds more upon completion. The Village's five mixed-use buildings will include a Trader Joe's, Target Express, Starbucks and 32 other retail establishments, as well as offer undergraduate housing, a fitness center, and numerous other amenities for USC and the surrounding community. USC Transportation will manage the on-site retail parking, in a 450-space underground structure.

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"While parking itself is a fairly straightforward business," Mazza said, "the setup of the Village project creates new challenges and opportunities for us. This is our first venture into this type of retail environment, and it will be the first time we're using vendor validation machines and processes in addition to ID cards and other systems we're more familiar with."

To determine best practices in the area of vendor validations, USC had to look no further than the retail developments of one of its own Board of Trustee members, Rick Caruso. His company, Caruso Affiliated, owns The Grove and The Americana at Brand, two retail centers in Los Angeles, both of which use vendor validation systems extensively.

In addition to learning more about their parking operations, site visits to those properties allowed Mazza and his team to see a concept that USC has been trying to embrace since late 2014: "The Experience Economy."

As detailed in B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore's bestselling book of the same name, the nature of our nation's economy has shifted from formerly providing commodities, to goods, to services, to now being one that thrives in providing *experiences*.

Gabe Badillo, Associate Director of USC Guest Relations, is embracing the concept.

"The guest experience of visiting the university often starts with us," he said. "We've always trained our staff to provide excellent customer service, but the concept

of providing 'experiences' goes beyond that. [They] are interactive, and personal to each guest – no two people have the same experience, because they're bringing their own history and emotions to it.

"Think of it as like going to Disneyland; people pay premiums to create memories of their visit. We want them to have the same emotional connection every time they come to USC."

One aspect of prodigious growth in an urban environment like USC's that the department needed to address was making sure students were still able to get around safely.

In January 2015, Senior Associate Director Michelle Garcia was tasked with solving that growing concern. She already was in charge of Transportation's student-operated Campus Cruisers, a safe-ride program in operation at USC since 1978. With 150 student employees and a fleet of 40-plus vehicles, Campus Cruisers responds to an average of 1,500 calls per night during its operating window of 6 p.m. to 2:45 a.m. As more and more students used the popular service, however, wait-times began to creep upwards.

"We've always had a response time target of no more than 15 minutes," Garcia said. "Unfortunately, it was difficult to maintain that level of service as more people started using Cruisers, and the university simultaneously requested that we expand our service boundaries. The number of vehicles and student employees we were able to maintain had reached a tipping point, and we needed to find another solution."

That solution was to create a unique program with a seemingly unlikely ally: Uber. The university worked with the ride-sharing company to create a special button on its app that would allow students to order rides once Campus Cruiser wait-times exceeded 15 minutes – with USC picking up the tab.

According to Garcia, it's been an overwhelmingly successful program.

"When it was first introduced, the service was available only during our busiest times, from 8 p.m. to midnight, Thursday-Sunday," she said. "In response to student demand, it has expanded to seven hours per night, seven days a week. Uber has literally transformed the way students navigate the surrounding community at night, and made the university environment safer than it's ever been," Garcia said.

While Garcia continues to manage the high-profile Uber relationship, an even higher-profile partner came knocking on the university's doors last year: the National Football League.

USC Auxiliary Services has managed the LA Memorial Coliseum since USC entered into a 99-year master lease at

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the property three years ago. Because the Coliseum is the long-time home of the USC Trojan football team, Transportation was called upon for its expertise in managing egress from the stadium.

"For years, we've partnered with the LA Department of Transportation, LAFD, LAPD, Metro, and a long list of other entities to manage egress from the Coliseum on game days," said Chris Wilson, Senior Associate Director of Guest Relations and Special Events. "Through these partnerships, we've created a traffic plan and streamlined the process of getting tens of thousands of people out of the Coliseum in less than an hour in most cases.

"The NFL and the Los Angeles Rams asked us to help manage that process for them, as well."

So far, it's been successful. 2016 was the first year of the three-year partnership with the Rams while the team's new stadium is being built in nearby Inglewood, CA. While many communities would welcome an NFL team with open arms and no constraints, the university had some concerns.

"The primary goal was not to disrupt USC's academic mission," Wilson said. "Two of the biggest requests we had of the NFL were no weekday home games during the school year, and no tailgating on campus at all on Sundays."

The Rams agreed, but had their own "big" request in

return: parking. The Sports Arena next to the Coliseum is being torn down to make way for a new soccer stadium, and the construction zone had removed a significant number of parking spaces on-site. Again, Transportation was asked for help.

"We have all the permit data and car count information they needed," Director Mazza said. "We determined that we could provide 6,000 spaces from our inventory on Sundays for the Rams, while still providing for our existing permit holders, the majority of whom are commuters. It's really been a win-win for everyone involved."

From building new parking structures and helping manage Coliseum egress, to forging new relationships with Uber and shifting the fabric of their economy to providing "experiences" for their guests, USC Transportation is helping change the face of its university.

"This is such an exciting time to be working at USC," Mazza said. "It's a vibrant community that's always growing and changing. There's no place I'd rather be."

David Donovan, who prepared this article, is an Associate Director for USC Transportation. Contact him at ddonovan@usc.edu.

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