John V. Walsh named Deputy Secretary for Engineering

By Pete Poore

A little more than twenty-one years ago, John Walsh came to SCDOT as a Bridge Inspector in District 1. With a degree from Clemson University in Civil Engineering in hand, he mulled over opportunities with construction companies, but decided that SCDOT was the best place to launch a professional career. His first project was the widening of I-20 from four lanes to six at Broad River Road in Columbia. The Pamplico native said his job as a bridge inspector taught him that bridges actually move more than you would think; they bounce, they expand and do all sorts of things that drivers don't usually notice but engineers do.

In October 1991, Walsh moved to Headquarters as an Assistant Project Engineer in Preconstruction. He was later promoted to Project Engineer, then to Project Development Engineer, and spent the last seven years serving as a Deputy State Highway Engineer.

Walsh has been heavily involved in some key changes in the way SCDOT does business. Some examples are: several design build projects, the MPO and COG Bonding programs, and the implementation of State Infrastructure Bank projects on behalf of County Governments. One of the more recent was the restructuring of the Preconstruction Division that was accomplished in 2007. "The intent of the reorganization was to streamline decision making and prioritization of resources at a much lower level of responsibility. This was a cumbersome task under the prior organizational structure, which involved a typical assembly line method of developing projects," Walsh said.

The goal has been to create more of a team concept where team members including District staff work together on a project from start to finish. Walsh believes this arrangement provides flexibility and better management of the projects. "Now you have the road design person sitting next to the hydrology person, who is sitting next to the bridge engineer and so on, and they all work for the same manager. The project designers have also been given more responsibility and the authority to make decisions about their projects," said Walsh. He added that the delivery of the project is the main goal rather than just its individual components.

Another challenge in recent years has been the creation and approval of the project priority processes for bridge, road, widening, interstate, safety, and other types of projects as mandated by Act 114 in 2007. The task was to draw up the criteria using engineering-based and other factors provided within the law that would determine the priority for any given project. This was not an easy, nor a quick challenge to overcome. "A big part of it was to establish criteria that resulted in priorities that are consistent with sound engineering principles and conditions on the ground being observed by our staff. They had to be understandable and repeatable, and accepted by the Secretary and Commission. Ultimately we needed to provide a project ranking process that could be explained to the public so that they too would be able to understand the "why" behind each project. " Walsh said.

ROB THOMPSON/THE CONNECTOR

John Walsh has been named Deputy Secretary for Engineering. On his desk, he displays his own version of 'Howard's Rock' at Clemson, which players rub for good luck.

Walsh believes that one of the biggest challenges that confronted SCDOT in recent years was also one of the best problems the agency has ever had. That was the $463 million in additional federal funds that resulted from the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

The new Deputy Secretary said that the condition of South Carolina's roads and adhering to the "Fix it First" strategy put into place by Secretary Limehouse were both strong determining factors as to how SCDOT should use the Recovery Act money. The result was the four major categories of work that were recommended to the Commission; resurfacing, bridge replacements, interstate maintenance and safety improvements.

Now that the ARRA funding has been obligated and he occupies the top position in the Engineering Division, what does Walsh see in the near future for SCDOT? "Based on our current state – that of being responsible for a large state highway system with varying needs in terms of maintenance and capacity - I see my job as promoting new or different approaches to those areas that we as a state have not attained our desired goals – for example in reducing deaths on the highways, or in being able to provide a better riding surface on many of the thousands of miles we own. We have to focus on taking care of our pennies, nickels, dimes so that we can put as many dollars as possible to work out on the highways, and we're going to have to stretch the dollars we have in a significant way." said Walsh.

Walsh's immediate plans include looking at expanding the road reclamation process, especially on roads where over 20% of the surfaces need to have patching performed. He also is working with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to qualify bridge replacement projects traditionally performed with state maintenance funding for federal aid which could save $10-12 million in state dollars annually.

Walsh encourages an atmosphere where the SCDOT Engineering staff can make decisions quickly by empowering those in responsible positions with the authority to take necessary actions to meet the challenges we face on a daily basis. "SCDOT is fortunate to be in a position to have open and flexible leadership, and extremely skilled staff. We're going to work together effectively as a team. Together this is a very powerful entity that can solve problems and do good things for the state and its citizens. I hope to unleash that potential while I'm in this job," said Walsh.

Walsh and his family are members of First Baptist Church of Columbia. When his day is done at SCDOT, Walsh returns to his Columbia home and Lisa, his wife of 18 years, and their daughters Abigail, 5, and Elizabeth (Lizzie), 3.