Rick Werts retires

By Pete Poore

SCDOT's Director of Traffic Engineering Rick Werts retired on June 3, 2010 after 39 years of service. The native of Ninety Six in Greenwood County spent a little over 19 years as TE Director presiding over a number of cutting-edge technological advances. But traffic engineering was rather simple when Werts started full-time at SCDOT.

Prior to earning his B.S. in Civil Engineering at Clemson University in 1971, he spent summers working in SCDOT's Greenwood Office. He came to Columbia in May of 1971 to begin his career in what was known as the Office of Traffic and Planning. "We had 35 people in that office back then. We basically dealt with signing, pavement markings and traffic signals," said Werts.

In November of 1978, Werts left Headquarters to become the District Traffic Engineer in District 1. He returned to Headquarters as Director of Traffic Engineering in January of 1991.The Office of Traffic and Planning had evolved into Traffic Engineering where 160 people work in a wide variety of operations.

Werts points to the Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) as the single largest advance in technology. "During my time at SCDOT we worked to establish the first traffic cameras on our highways, which led to electronic message signs, speed detection and HAR radios used to provide information for motorists. We now have the Traffic Management Center (TMC) in Columbia and four regional TMCs. And now the 5-1-1 information phone system is on the way," said Werts.

Technology has led to the creation of new operations like Road Data Services, Pavement Management and Mapping and G-I-S Services."

A major responsibility for Traffic Engineering is hurricane evacuation. Werts said the population growth on South Carolina's coast presents a daunting challenge to move people safely. This point was proven in 1999 by Hurricane Floyd. "Floyd changed the thinking," he said.

"For the first time in South Carolina, we had a statewide evacuation of the entire coast while people from Florida and Georgia poured into the state. Reversing lanes on interstate highways was unheard of. Now after a lot of effort over many years, we have a plan to reverse interstates and other key highways. It's a plan I hope will never have to be used," said Werts.

What are the thoughts of a 39-year SCDOT employee as he retires? "It's been a wonderful career for me and we've made tremendous progress along the way, but it's time to move on." The retired Director of Traffic Engineering plans to do some consulting in the future. "I'm excited about the possibility of doing some hands on engineering. You don't do much engineering in management. You mostly handle hot-button issues and planning," Werts said.

Asked what advice he would leave for his successor or anyone in management Werts replied, "You appoint good assistants. Give them the assets that they need to do the job, and then get out of the way."

ROB THOMPSON/THE CONNECTOR

Rick Werts, left, hands over the title of Director of Traffic Engineering to Tony Sheppard. Werts retired from SCDOT with 39 years of service including 19 years as Director of Traffic Engineering.

Tony Sheppard

Residence:
Saluda County

Education:
Gilbert High School, BS in Civil Engineering from USC, Registered Professional Engineer in SC

Hobbies:
Hunting and fishing

Family: Wife, Paige; Son, Dakota; and daughter, Shelby

Tony Sheppard is new Director of Traffic Engineering

By Bob Kudelka

In the fast-changing world of traffic engineering, it is sometimes better not to be first.

The challenge to keep up with new technology is measured with choosing the best solution, something government agencies such as SCDOT can use to their advantage, said Tony Sheppard, the new Director of Traffic Engineering.

"We feel like we're in the best place possible," Sheppard said. "We're just far enough behind 'the cutting edge' that we learn from others' experiences and we take advantage of that. We don't have the missteps that a lot of others have because we're not on the 'cutting edge,' but we're still far enough forward to stay up with the latest efficiencies of the system."

A 23-year veteran of SCDOT, Sheppard was named Director on June 10, succeeding Rick Werts.

The field of traffic engineering has come a long way during Sheppard's career. Traffic signals and signs have been joined by GPS (global positioning satellite) information, remote-controlled cameras and the internet as key components.

The philosophy of "traffic management" has evolved.

"The newer way of managing traffic is having an informed motorist and allowing the motorist to make the best decision for themselves with good, real-time accurate information," Sheppard said. "That's a little bit of change from the past, when we would tell them to take a certain route. With this, we try to give them the information so they can make the decision for themselves. In turn, it ends up helping the roadway system when they make those decisions because no one enjoys being stuck in traffic."

Sheppard's career with SCDOT began when he was in college. He worked part-time at the Research and Materials Lab analyzing soil samples.

After graduating USC with a bachelor of science in civil engineering in 1989, Sheppard joined Lexington Construction.

He left the Department for a short stint at the Savannah River Site in 1990. He re-joined SCDOT four months later in the Traffic Safety Office of Traffic Engineering, working on the railroad safety and the highway safety program.

Sheppard, in what he describes as a highlight of his career, helped develop the SHEP program in 1996.

"I was there when it was initiated and I've gotten to see it evolve over the years from the initial idea and concept," he said. "It's grown from four people in Columbia."

In 1998, Sheppard moved to District 1 as Assistant District Traffic Engineer. Three years later he became District Traffic Engineer.

In 2004, Sheppard returned to Headquarters as Assistant to the Deputy State Highway Engineer. He became State Traffic Operations Engineer in 2006 and held that position until his promotion in June.

As Director of Traffic Engineering, Sheppard supervises approximately 160 employees. He describes his management style as "open door" and said he welcomes new ideas from employees.

Traffic Engineering includes signing, marking, traffic signals, small intersection projects and how traffic affects designs.

It also includes ITS, or Intelligent Transportation Systems, road data services, GIS mapping, pavement evaluation, traffic count data and overseeing of the SHEP program. The Traffic Management Center on Shop Road is also part of Traffic Engineering.

"Technology has played a big role in traffic engineering," Sheppard said. "It's come a long way."

Traffic signals have gone from traditional bulbs that would burn out frequently to LEDs, saving energy and maintenance costs.

New management control methods are on the horizon, as SCDOT looks at the best ways to use technology.

"It's come a long way in allowing us to manage ever-growing responsibilities more efficiently and quickly to meet the needs of a changing environment," Sheppard said.