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A Conversation With . . .

Bikestation's President And CEO Andrea White-Kjoss



Andrea White-Kjoss is president and CEO of Bikestation. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

The emergence of a bike-friendly culture in Long Beach has accelerated at an ever-increasing pace. With the creation of green bike lanes, called “sharrows,” on 2nd Street in Belmont Shore to the installation of 400 creative bike racks and a new “bike boulevard” along Vista Street, the evidence is clear: Long Beach is shifting gears toward a healthier means of transportation.

To many travelers it just makes sense. It's cleaner for our environment, healthier for the passenger, increases quality of life, reduces congestion on the roads and is more affordable than driving a car. In fact, from 2008 to 2009, the total number of bicyclists on a given weekend, counted at three particular bike routes in the city, increased 12 percent, jumping from 1,271 to 1,418 bicyclists, according to the city's BikeLongBeach.org.

As more people have apparently taken to biking than ever

before, Andrea White-Kjoss finds herself at the forefront of that movement. In 2004, she took over as executive director of Bikestation Coalition, a non-profit organization that evolved out of a concept first originated in Long Beach in 1996. Residents John and Georgia Case came up with a vision to capture the momentum found in Europe and Japan, looking to provide rental and repair services and secure 24/7 bike parking for the community. The first facility was built in close proximity to buses and metro trains downtown, ultimately providing a network of travel options.

Today, White-Kjoss is the president and CEO of Mobis Transportation Alternatives, Inc., a hybrid spin-off of the original model now operated more as a for-profit consulting firm (with 2 percent of revenues still going back to the original non-profit) promoting its popular brand of Bikestations and other concepts across the country and around the globe. She says our society has been stuck in a “monoculture” but that city planners are now focusing more on urbanization instead of the suburban standard.

Mobis has become one of the most rapidly expanding privately held companies in its industry to weather the economic recession, focusing most of its business on designing, developing and managing bike transit centers. With construction of a new and expanded Bikestation facility at the Promenade Square in Downtown Long Beach now underway, Bikestation Long Beach currently serves close to 30,000 cyclists per year, including an average of 5,000 bikes parked, White-Kjoss said. Mobis/Bikestation has 15 facilities built in the United States, seven of which are branded Bikestations. Architecturally unique in design, they are centered in localities as “pieces of art,” such as the sleek Union Station facility in Washington, D.C., or the newly opened Bikestation in Hillsboro, Oregon.

The demand for projects is so high, in fact, the company has set an objective to build 200 more Bikestation-like facilities within the next five years, she said. Featured in prominent industry trade magazines such as Bicycle Retailer and Bicycling Magazine, White-Kjoss most recently was honored as the 2010 private sector professional of the year by the Association of Bicycle and Pedestrian Professionals (APBP). White-Kjoss sat down with Staff Writer Sean Belk to talk about the company's projects, goals and aspirations.

LBBJ: What services does Mobis/Bikestation offer?

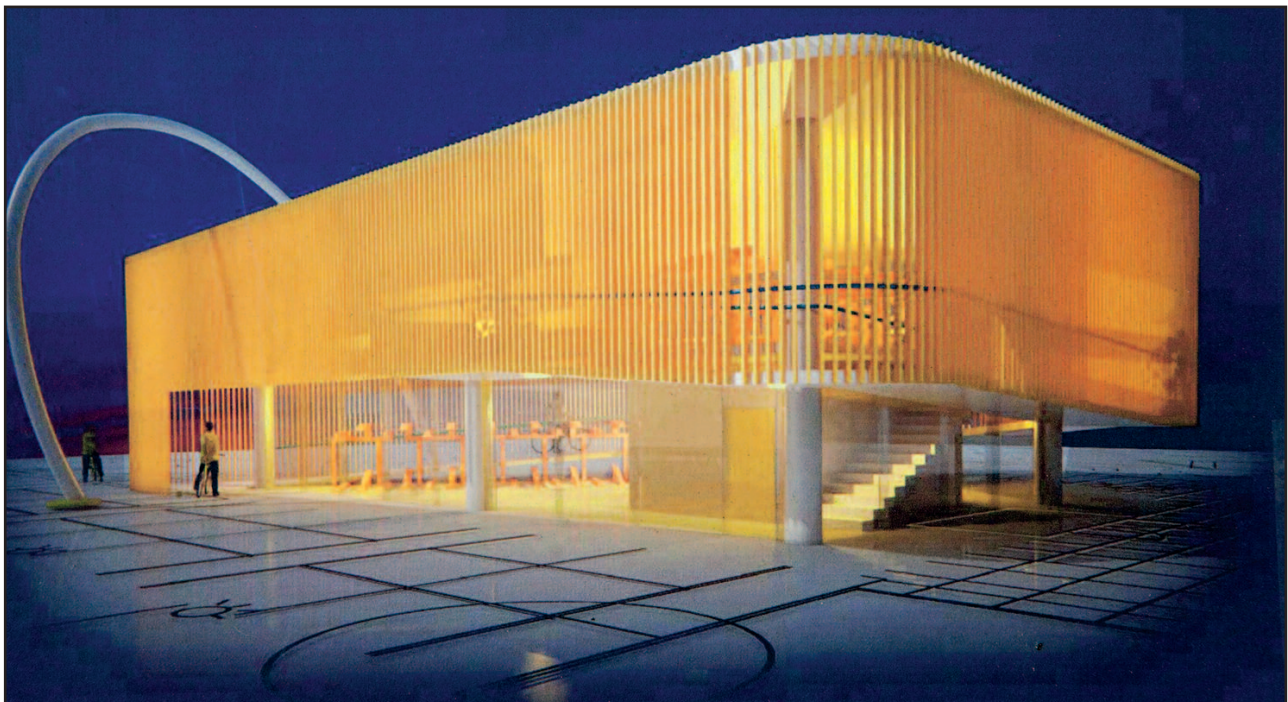
White-Kjoss: The name Bikestation is known throughout its 14-year history for basically developing, designing, building and operating bike transit centers, and so we connect all of those services under the Bikestation brand. Mobis is really more of the name of the company versus the well-known brand, and there are other examples you can probably think of where that's true of a company, where their brands are better known than the company.

Throughout our history we've always been on the cutting edge of transportation. Even before the transition, we had

done the first pilot projects in the U.S. for electric vehicle sharing. For example, we were involved in the earliest car sharing efforts. We've created really multi-model transportation hubs where you have secure bike parking, bike sharing, electric vehicle sharing – like electric bikes and electric scooters – and car sharing. And all of them are at or near your transit hubs. So you have this really dynamic ability to choose your transportation. So, yes, Mobis is still involved in efforts to create these multi-model hubs, and we're on basically a third generation now. What we're seeing is a network type of inner-operable system being devel-



Bikestation President and Chief Executive Officer Andrea White-Kjoss stands at the future site of Bikestation Long Beach on 1st Street between Pine Avenue and Long Beach Boulevard. Until the new facility is completed (rendering shown below) around February 2011, all bike parking, rentals and repairs are at a temporary location at 222 E. Broadway. The new structure will offer secure, indoor bicycle parking for free during regular business hours and 24/7 secure parking for members. The facility will also house a bike retail shop and offer bike rentals and professional repair services. For more information, visit www.bikestation.org/longbeach. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)



oped of multi-model hubs but also growing the Bikestation brand as well.

LBBJ: Tell me what the company was like in 1996, when first starting out, and why in Long Beach?

White-Kjoss: I've heard a lot about the beginnings over the years. I've been involved for seven years now. In the beginning, [the Bikestation structure] was a beautifully architected, corrugated metal building, but it didn't have heating or cooling. It became this kind of effective curiosity and that's what sort of drove other cities to look at Long Beach to say, 'What is that? What are you doing there?,' and to recreate that in their own way in other cities. Over the years [it has] enabled us to be able to refine the concept and develop it into something that is, today, what we're talking about now: 15 facilities on ground and six dozen more that I know of in the United States that are on the books. We've worked in Mexico. We've worked in China. We've worked in Canada. So . . . it's hard for me to talk about the past without talking about how they've put it together. John and Georgia had a really solid company that set a springboard for the future. When I picked it up, I had something really solid to work with.

LBBJ: Was there anyone who predicted the idea would fail, and what has kept you motivated to continue with the concept?

White-Kjoss: It is hard being at the forefront of something . . . We're still in that situation where we could very well be the first mouse with the cheese . . . in a negative way. But what I see is that it's getting easier and easier. I don't walk into too many situations anymore where people say, 'Well, what's the use of that?' or 'I don't even see why we could even use that.' That's very rare anymore, and it used to be quite common. Of course, people who bicycle understand inherently why it's useful. Even if they can't use it themselves or don't have a need for it, there are a lot of people who do.

So when we get called by a city, there's usually a bicycle coordinator or a sustainability coordinator who hears about the idea, who likes it and calls us up and then it kind of spirals from there. We walk in after they've invited us to a meeting and the mayor's office is there, the city council's office is there. This is really important, because they've seen it's really effective in getting people on bicycles and on transit.

LBBJ: What type of environment or community finds a Bikestation appealing?

White-Kjoss: I think that most communities have, if not sustainability goals written out in a plan, [then] aspirations of being sustainable and environmentally friendly. So it's kind of interesting where, as 15 years ago this idea probably appealed more to those cities that were most well known and out and ahead of the curve in terms of sustainability, right now it's getting mainstream. That was one of the reasons for the shift, because this is truly the time when cities are competing to be the most bicycle-friendly city in the country. Cities are competing to be known for their other sustainability goals. So it's really, like I said, mainstream.

LBBJ: What can you say about the goal of Long Beach becoming the most bike-friendly city in the nation, and

what does Long Beach have to do in order to get there?

White-Kjoss: It's a wonderful aspiration. When you can give people something concrete to aspire to it helps move all of the resources to that goal, the political will, the economic resources, the expertise. And I think we've seen that in Long Beach. We've seen an enormous shift over the last couple of years that was being set up for the last 10 to 15 years. But a number of things took place, changes in staff, elected officials . . . We have just a really good grant writer here in the city and so we're getting a lot of federal money from state and federal sources for our bike program. . . .

We have [representatives of] cities coming from all over the country to Long Beach and touring the infrastructure [and] innovative programs we have here for bicycling. We're being mentioned in the same breath and the same sentences as places like Portland and New York City that are innovators. So it's gratifying to see it really working. The other thing is not just putting this stuff down and hoping people use it . . . We're measuring a lot of the programs and infrastructure that we're putting in place, and there's, statistically, safety in numbers for more bicyclists. The more bicyclers on the road means greater safety for everyone. Since those green lanes down in Belmont Shore [were put in], we've seen bicyclist numbers double in Belmont Shore which is revenue to the retailers down there, revenue to the city in general. Residents and tourists want to come here and stay here and spend their money here, so this is really creating an interesting community effect and economic and environmental benefit.

LBBJ: Tell us about the plans for the new Long Beach Bikestation expansion.

White-Kjoss: It's under construction right now. It's a 1,500-square-foot facility. There's a first floor and a mezzanine, and it's really interesting because . . . the secure access for the 24/7 bike parking is access up a ramp that wraps around the building. We really like to do things that are architecturally interesting, and we're good at doing it in a very economical way. So the access wraps around the building and the 24/7 parking is on the mezzanine. Down below that there are all the services that we currently offer, valet bike parking, repair, rentals, retail. People can come in and work on their own bikes, and our guys will help them do that. They can use our tools. It's really a community cycling center. The newest addition is going to be a shower and restroom. We're excited about that. The redevelopment agency has been really supportive along this process. It's taken longer than most people would have anticipated, but it's coming together. It's going to be a beautiful facility. It's going to be just a jewel for the city.

LBBJ: How much will it cost, and is the city contributing towards that?

White-Kjoss: I don't know what the final tally is going to be.

LBBJ: How often is the current Long Beach facility being used?

White-Kjoss: It has grown – now for the third time in its history. So the city wouldn't be supportive of that if it was-

n't very useful in making changes to transportation habits and reducing congestion and all of that. What we know is that up to 65 percent of people who are using the Bikestation facility were previously driving their car. Lack of secure bike parking and the other services that we offer are always in the top three . . . reasons why people don't bicycle. We've done research over the past 14 years and looked at other research that's been done, and those are consistently the top three reasons: lack of secure bike parking; lack of on-street infrastructure; and lack of showers and changing rooms. It's about convenience, safety and security.

LBBJ: Why did you need to expand the Bikestation in Long Beach?

White-Kjoss: There was a new vision for the Promenade Square. It looks very, very different now than it did before. The structures that we had at the Bikestation didn't fit in with the plan for the Promenade Square. So that opportunity was taken to expand the services, expand the Bikestation and put in a new building right there. There are a lot of changes in development.

LBBJ: What will the new Bikestation facility bring to Long Beach?

White-Kjoss: What this will bring to Long Beach is a final and permanent home for the Bikestation, and that's important because it is in some ways very challenging to get people to change their transportation habits. Once you've gotten them to do that, to move their system about, even a block or two, it is difficult for them to adjust. So we've had these sort of highs and lows and peaks and valleys of usage and our ability to respond to the customers over the years because of all these moves. The move into the facility will be our fifth in 14 years. Having the continuity of this new facility is going to be extremely important to people who are bicycling or people who want to bicycle and use transit to enable people to get to and from their jobs, to enable people to get more efficiently wherever they want to go. The exposure won't hurt either. We're going to ramp up the press for this and expose Long Beach even more for being bicycle-friendly and sustainable.

LBBJ: Tell me what it was like to put in a Bikestation at Union Station in Washington, D.C., and how that deal came about?

White-Kjoss: We were a part of that for the last seven years. We were working with the district department of transportation on that facility in the planning stages and design, the build out and the operations. It took quite a while. It's a very complex site. It's not just about the site; the building itself is extremely unique. It's really a piece of public art that declares the district's dedication to bicycling. So, these . . . kind of facilities are sort of the hub of what eventually will be a network of Bikestation-type facilities within the region. It's interesting because the location there is so important for bicycling just in general in the U.S., because policy makers can look at that facility . . . walk through there and see how well it's being used and talk to people about why they love it.

We just completed a first-year survey and got some

extremely good feedback on it. A colleague of mine from one of the national bicycling organizations said this was . . . the most important development in bicycling since 1991 when the first transportation bill, that included a significant amount of bicycling and transportation funding, was passed. It was like a banner year. It's a huge compliment from a community that knows.

LBBJ: Why are there more people riding bikes today? What's the fascination with cycling?

White-Kjoss: What we know about why people are riding more these days is that there is this real increase in urbanization. Younger people are wanting to live in a setting where you can walk down from your condo and have access to your entertainment, your food, your transit, everything right there at your doorstep. We're moving away from the really suburban form of urban planning that we were before. It's the most convenient way to get around besides walking. I think you have to have a top-down and bottom-up approach. You can't just have the top down and social engineering and forcing people to do what they don't want to do. No, this has really come from the bottom up, and our leaders are now responding to it with additional resources and policy support and things like that, so those things are really making a difference.

LBBJ: What about green jobs? Do you see bicycling creating more jobs?

White-Kjoss: I absolutely do . . . I absolutely see companies like ours attracting green jobs. Every job in our company is a green job. . . . And we're probably one of Long Beach's fastest growing companies, which is a great thing. It's also attracting and retaining the type of people who are going to really make this city great in a lot of different ways. People who have a lot of vision and care for the city . . . We have a thousand choices for ice cream when we go to the store. We almost consider an American way of life to have choices, and nobody in my company or anybody that is associated with this movement that's actually being affected is against the car. I like my car. It's the right tool for the right time. But I love my bicycle. I love Long Beach Transit. Long Beach Transit is a wonderful transit system. We're really lucky here in Long Beach to have that, and it's about being able to have the right choice at the right time. We've been such a [car] monoculture, and I don't think that's healthy. I look to the environment for clues of what's healthy, and monocultures in the environment aren't healthy.

LBBJ: How do your company's goals match what investors are looking for?

White-Kjoss: That's a really great question. The types of investors that invest in our company are really self-selective. They're looking for companies that are doing more than just creating economic value alone. They're looking for the full package. We're going to see a bubble around green investing as we did with technology in the 90s. But ultimately the great concepts, and there are many of them, and the good companies will be strong and come out of it just like the good companies came out of it during the Internet bubble. ■