

Little Italy-University Circle Red Line Station Rendition. Photo courtesy GCRTA.

Vice President Biden Speaks on Infrastructure: A First Person Account

By Gina Beim, P.E.

The call came late on Tuesday May 14, 2014. The next day **Vice President Joe Biden** was going to be speaking at the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) Central Rail Complex about the importance of infrastructure, and my name was on the invitation list! I was thrilled. The Cleveland Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers is celebrating their Centennial Anniversary this year, and suspected that the Vice President would mention the *ASCE Report Card for Infrastructure* in his remarks. Because of our expectation our ASCE Section had asked to be invited to the event. As chair of the Centennial Anniversary Committee, I would be the lucky one to attend.

You have to arrive super early for events such as these, which was good as everyone had time to dry out from the pouring rain before the program began (no umbrellas allowed!). While waiting I was exchanging emails with *Foundation Drilling* Managing Editor **Sherry Epperson** on behalf of one of the firms I work with. Sherry suggested I report on what the Vice President had to say, so I started recording and taking pictures. As a member of the engineering and construction community, ADSC is, of course, very interested in infrastructure issues.

Vice President Biden was in Cleveland to highlight the importance of infrastructure to the U.S. economy. The White House selected GCRTA as its host for VP Biden's visit due to the progress already made, and that which is anticipated, from the new $17.5 million *Little Italy-University Circle Red Line* heavy rail station, 80% of which is funded by federal dollars, including a $9 million TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant.

Also on May 15, **President Barack Obama** was in New York City presenting a similar message at the construction site of the new Tappan Zee Bridge, a project on which *Foundation Drilling* magazine has reported, and for which the federal government provided a $1.6 billion loan. Both speeches were part of the **May 12 to 16 Infrastructure Week**, an effort by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business, labor and non-governmental organizations (including ASCE) to, according to their website, "Explore emerging solutions, innovative approaches and best practices being developed nationwide to modernize America's aging infrastructure."

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The President and Vice President were trying to raise public support for the fiscal 2015 transportation spending bill. Biden told the Cleveland audience that the Highway Trust Fund would become insolvent by September of this year, implying that the insolvency could result in state and local transportation projects across the

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nation being terminated for lack of federal funds.

As I write, the 2015 $54 billion Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development bill has just passed through the full Senate Appropriations Committee and is now headed to the Senate Floor. This bill would fully fund the current surface transportation authorization law, "Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century" (MAP-21), and includes $40.3 billion for the Federal-Aid Highways Program and $550 million for the TIGER Grant Program that is funding the Little Italy station. The House version of the bill, scheduled to be debated on the House floor, includes a similar amount for highways but only $100 million for TIGER.

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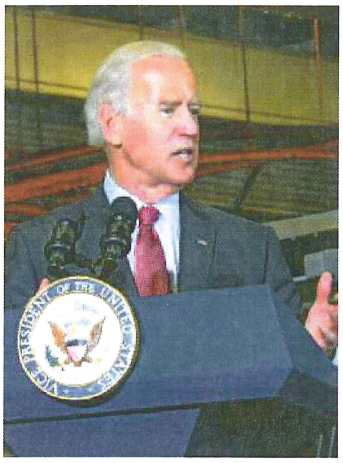
The audience of local dignitaries, GCRTA employees and members of the civil engineering and construction community were marveling at the shiny, polished heavy and light rail cars in the maintenance facility when RTA CEO **Joe Calabrese** walked in to open the event. "RTA is honored that Vice President Biden decided to visit our rail complex and highlight our development on the Red Line in Little Italy," he remarked "We're glad that Vice President Biden and the Obama administration understand the importance of public transit and improved infrastructure to support it."

Vice President Joe Biden

Biden, while cheerful and joking about his love for trains and cannoli (the station was, after all, in Little Italy) had a stern message: "Infrastructure is the backbone of the economic might of America," he said, stressing that sound infrastructure helps to retain existing business and draw new employers as well. "The best way to create jobs is to invest in our infrastructure – trains, roads, bridges, canals, airports … that infrastructure which is in serious need of repair." Referring to the *ASCE Report Card for America's Infrastructure* he added, "There's a group of engineers, ASCE, serious people, that estimate that 3.6 trillion dollars in new investment is needed by 2020."



United States Vice President Joe Biden. Photo by the author.

Construction of bridges, airports and other infrastructure is certainly a topic of great interest to the ADSC community. While drilled shafts are not the only deep foundation system employed in this project, they are being used for several rail stations owned by the agency, such as the E55th station shown on page 60. ADSC Technical Affiliate Member, **GRL Engineers, Inc.** performed integrity testing using the pulse echo method and high strain dynamic foundation testing and analyses on the 48 inch and 36 inch drilled shafts of this project.

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Biden also discussed his visit to St. Louis, made earlier in the week, where he visited the Park Over Highway construction site. The Park Over Highway will, according to Biden, will greatly help the St. Louis tourism industry. It consists of a pedestrian bridge that will ease access to the iconic Gateway Arch. That structure was also partially funded by a TIGER grant and will be partially constructed on drilled shafts.

There is no way to predict how the U.S. House and Senate will support highway funding in the near term, however, it is clear



GCRTA CEO Joe Calabrese speaks in the maintenance facility of the agency. Photo by the author.

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E55th Street Rapid Transit Station Reconstruction Project, where drilled shafts were used. Photo courtesy of GRL Engineers, Inc.

from both President Obama and Vice President Biden's remarks made on May 15th that the Administration considers highway, and overall infrastructure investment to be a high priority for this nation.

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