

LADOT Chief Draws Community Flack for Removal of JA Official

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James Okazaki is second Nikkei to exit city department.



[MARIO G. REYES/Rafu Shimpō](#)

On June 1, LADOT new Chief Jeff removed James Okazaki from his position as Deputy General Manager and placed him on administrative leave.

The abrupt removal of a high-ranking Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) official has prompted a Japanese American group to call for an investigation into the actions of the City's new transportation chief, Gloria J. Jeff.

On June 1, Jeff removed James Okazaki from his position as LADOT Deputy General Manager and placed him on administrative leave. Upon learning of the action, the Little Tokyo Community Council (LTCC) at its June 20 meeting voted unanimously to lodge a protest and request Okazaki's reinstatement. In a letter to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa with copies to Los Angeles City Council members, the LTCC outlined Okazaki's more than 35 years as a "loyal, hard-working, and dedicated employee of the City."

Comprised of representatives from 90 organizations, businesses, and religious institutions, the LTCC simultaneously questioned the manner in which Okazaki was removed from his position, calling it "undignified ... shameful and disrespectful."

Okazaki said he's touched by the level and amount of support he's received since news of his removal has circulated.

Jeff, 53, who took over as LADOT Director on March 20, reportedly called Okazaki into her office, advised him that he was being removed from his post, and ordered him to leave immediately. However, at the time Okazaki was conducting a department meeting with visiting dignitaries from Japan. He asked for two hours to complete the assignment. At the end of the day, Okazaki recalls that he only had time to pack a few of his belongings into a box and left quietly. He felt humiliated and as if he was being treated "like a criminal."

Contacted by *The Rafu Shimpō*, Jeff refused to comment, saying, "This is a personnel matter and a union matter."

Okazaki had become a prominent figure in the Asian American community for his consistent support of local events and programs both as a volunteer and as a City representative. He's also credited with playing a key role in the

development and expansion of the DASH transportation system. Additionally, Okazaki was in charge of multi-jurisdictional and regional projects, including all of the Metrorail stations, Metrolink projects, and Harbor Freeway transitway.

Okazaki is the second high-level JA to leave the LADOT since Villaraigosa took office. Last October, Wayne Tanda left the LADOT's top job to return to his hometown of San Jose. Tanda had been appointed by Villaraigosa's predecessor, Mayor James Hahn, in 2002.

Jeff previously served as Deputy Federal Highway Administrator in the Clinton Administration. Following a brief stint as a consultant for a private firm, Gov. Jennifer Granholm named her Michigan's Department of Transportation Director in February 2003. However, Jeff resigned last Feb. 27 under a miasma of controversy when members of the bipartisan Mackinac Bridge Authority (MBA) bristled at her attempts to strip the MBA of its powers.

Jeff's plan to move \$25 million from the Authority to the State Treasury and take away the MBA's autonomy led to the formation of a Legislative subcommittee to restore the Authority's oversight role.

Jeff's supporters say that she was operating under the Michigan governor's mandate to save money wherever possible, but Gov. Granholm insisted that she had no advance knowledge of Jeff's plans. Kirk Steudle, her chief deputy, filled in while Jeff went on medical leave.

Last Feb. 27, she announced that she was resigning, and on March 9, Villaraigosa held appointed Jeff the City's new LADOT General Manager.

Local television correspondent Tom Skubick, writing in the Lansing State Journal on Dec. 30, called Jeff's proposed reform measures "commendable" but also said that she failed to forewarn Gov. Granholm of the actions she was about to take. "Jeff is a political liability with a capital L," Skubick wrote, adding that Jeff was reportedly advised to "get out of Dodge by Feb. 1."

The Detroit Free Press supported Jeff, the first African American and the first woman to occupy Michigan's top transportation job: "The state has lost a straight – sometimes blunt – speaking professional who always put policy above politics."

Whether or not Villaraigosa knew about the tumultuous circumstances surrounding Jeff's departure from Michigan, he's putting L.A.'s complex and wide-ranging transportation and traffic matters in her hands. Japanese American community leaders as well as City Hall insiders believe that the questions being raised concerning her management style, in general, and Okazaki's dismissal, in particular, aren't likely to evaporate anytime soon.
