outside the meeting room, it’s a bright summer morning on the University of Washington campus in Seattle. Inside there’s an empty spot at the U-shaped table where political and transportation heavyweights — including members of the Washington congressional delegation, state legislators and Gov. Christine Gregoire — have gathered to launch a day of targeted sight-seeing and lobbying with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood.

LaHood is on a national tour to see and draw attention to projects where Obama Administration stimulus money has been — or can be — put to good use. He has much sway over which states get more money, so this day of show-and-tell is important to Washington’s transportation future.

Where, then, is the state’s top transportation official and advocate, its own secretary of transportation?

“This seat’s for Paula,” says the governor, looking at the empty chair to her right. “I’m told she’s on her way.”

Sure enough, within a couple of minutes, having awakened only a few hours earlier at a family campsite 270 miles away in the Oregon Cascades, in walks Paula Hammond, boss of Washington’s complex highway system, de facto admiral of the nation’s largest ferry system, and the woman in charge of a 7,100-employee agency aimed at getting Evergreen State residents from here to there and home again despite daunting geographical, meteorological and economic roadblocks.

The Klamath Falls native and 1979 Oregon State civil engineering graduate looks none the worse for having spent the night in a sleeping bag.

Still technically on a vacation planned before LaHood’s visit was announced, she slips quietly into her seat.

“Always on time and on budget,” a smiling Gregoire observes. LaHood is introduced and the daylong transportation love-fest begins in earnest.

“I want to congratulate the governor, her team, and your secretary of transportation for getting it right,” he says, nodding toward Hammond, who is still catching her breath and will later note that “I flew, I drove and I ran” to get to the meeting.

“The money is being spent on time and on budget in Washington, with no sweetheart deals,” LaHood continues.

During the briefings that follow, Hammond’s polite but frequent interjections to her staff’s presentations make it clear that she has a broad and detailed handle on her agency and its mission. Officials from the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT, commonly called “Wash-DOT”) make pitches for more federal help. At one point they note that President Barack Obama has said he’d like to see a renewed commitment to high-speed passenger rail, which they envision for the Willamette Valley–Portland–Seattle corridor. LaHood says he’ll look into that.

“If the president likes it, I think I like it too,” he adds with a grin.

Soon he and the entourage are off on a tour that includes a
visit to Seattle’s new light-rail system, a ferry ride across Puget Sound and a ribbon-cutting celebration for a tunnel built to keep ferry traffic from inundating downtown Bremerton many times a day.

At some stops Hammond — a 30-year veteran of her agency — patiently stays in the background; at others she’s front-and-center. Appointed by Gregoire to the state’s top transportation post in 2007, she is proud of her agency and devoted to its mission, but she’s also aware of how hard it is to win and keep the public’s trust. Privately she recalls that several years ago, when she was rising through the ranks at Wash-DOT while having three children and “it seemed like I was always pregnant,” one transportation commissioner joked “that I was the only thing at Wash-DOT that was delivering consistently.”

The main goal of her job, she says, is to make it possible for Washington travelers to get wherever they need to go and back home to their families as quickly and safely as possible. In the matter-of-fact way of an engineer, her leadership style is to insist that the agency be as efficient as possible at converting public money into transportation solutions.

“I like getting it done earlier than on time, and under budget,” she says. She’s a big believer in metrics — using numbers and precise records to track her agency’s progress.

She’s also a former high school cheerleader, and as the day progresses, whenever she has a turn at the podium, she directs praise not only to the assembled politicians but also to her middle managers and her rank-and-file workers.

“They’re all part of the great team at Wash-DOT that gets things done for our state,” she says, leading the applause herself.

Gregoire and others say Hammond can be counted on for leadership and candor. At Bremerton, Hammond draws chuckles from the crowd when she notes that local officials have arranged for an Army National Guard band to lead the celebrants in a march through the new tunnel after the ribbon-cutting, and that the goal is to impress LaHood “so that he’ll be sure to remember us when it’s time to pass around more of that federal money.”

Gregoire smiles and nods with enthusiasm. Later, during the ferry ride back to Seattle, the governor has high praise for Hammond. She insists that — although the engineer from Oregon was Wash-DOT’s second-in-command when her predecessor retired, and she had a lot of fans in and out of her agency — Hammond’s appointment wasn’t automatic.

“We looked all around the country,” Gregoire says. “We couldn’t find a better person for the job. She’s an engineer (reportedly the first to head Washington’s transportation department in more than 20 years) and — I say this with all due respect to engineers — she can communicate. She has a great sense of humor, she can laugh at herself, and she can stand toe to toe with anyone on the issues. In a crisis, there’s no one who can get to the solution faster.”
Having worked her entire post-college career at Wash-DOT, Hammond has admirers on both sides of the political aisle. Gregoire notes than when her Republican opponent in the governor’s race listed Hammond among officials who would be fired if he got elected, “we heard that state Republicans told him, ‘Are you crazy?’”

State Rep. Judy Clibborn, chair of Washington’s House Transportation Committee, has worked closely with Hammond for three years.

“She knows the facts, and she is charming,” Clibborn says. “I have watched her in groups where people are very upset about either what is happening or what is not happening, and she is just amazing.”

Clibborn and the governor both praise Hammond’s ability to take surprises in stride. Hammond says remaining unperturbed in unusual situations was part of the deal when she decided to be an engineer.

“At Oregon State I was one of eight women in my civil engineering class,” she recalls. “It was something like eight out of 120.”

She was even more unique when she started to show up at job sites.

“You look different; you’re maybe one of the first women they’ve seen in this particular job,” she says. “All the wives hated me without even knowing me, and the guys were all really nervous. Sometimes the main question after I was introduced was, ‘Where’s she’s going to go to the bathroom?’”

Born a Cavanaugh in an Irish Catholic family that’s a fixture in Klamath Falls, Hammond credits the since-closed Sacred Heart Academy with getting her ready for college.

“The beauty of the Catholic school education that I had was that the good sisters of St. Francis made sure that everyone was headed to college,” she says. “It was all college prep. There was a lot of science and math.”

She got conflicting career advice at home.

“Mom said ‘you could be an accountant or you could be a nurse,’” she recalls, but older brother Matt, who trained as an engineer at Notre Dame, suggested civil engineering. He’d noticed that the field had few women, and he assured his little sister that it would be an easy major.

The “easy” part would prove to be a bit of a fib, she says, noting that she was “social to the max” at the expense of her studies during her early days at OSU.

Soon, though, engineering — especially as applied to transportation — captured her interest. She had always admired the Klamath County engineer who was a friend of her father, because his job was to make people’s lives better by helping them get around.

“That you should make a contribution was just part of how we were raised,” she said. “I wanted to go build things that would help people.”

Part of that desire has translated into an uncompromising emphasis on safety, which has led Hammond.
to permanently close major but
defective bridges, permanently park
several aging ferries and set aside
several quick-fix proposals that had
political appeal but seemed foolhardy
to the engineer in her.

The Seattle metropolitan area’s
legendary traffic congestion is one
of her tougher problems, but so are
rusting ferries, decaying overpasses,
seasonal floods that close Interstate
5 and heavy snowfall that closes
Interstate 90.

Whenever weather puts her crews
in emergency mode, Hammond tries
to show up on location to draw at-
tention to how well they’re respond-
ing.

“I’ve never met a disaster I didn’t
like,” she says. “I’ve made it a real
mission to go to the site and talk
about what we’re doing, to show how
our Wash-DOT people are working
to make it safe to travel.”

Often interviewed in front of rag-
ing rivers, avalanches and similarly
confounding barriers to smooth
travel, she tries to keep her public
comments free of jargon.

“It’s so easy to fog up and confuse
people by using our insider talk,”
she says. “I don’t B.S. ’em. My joke
is that I’m not a very good engineer,
which is why I’m a good communi-
cator.”

Anyone in Hammond’s position
can draw blame for problems real
and perceived, but she takes that in
stride and says it seldom gets out of
hand.

“You just have to weather through
that stuff,” she says. “There was a
man the other night in Vancouver,
where we were meeting about tolling
options for the new Columbia cross-
ing, who was angry and pretty ver-
bally abusive. I wanted to ask him,
‘How can you look at yourself in the
mirror when you talk to people like
that?’ but I didn’t.”

She laughs. “I actually thought of
a lot of snappy comebacks, but that
was when I was driving back to the
motel after the meeting, which is
probably good.”

She credits her husband Alan
Hammond, a professional land
surveyor, with being a great support
to her and a fine father to their three
children. She notes that part of why
she has so much empathy for Wash-
ington drivers is that she spends so
much time on the road beside them,
eager to get home for cherished time
with her family.

“I’m out there on those roads all
the time,” she says.

She is not, however, a typical com-
muter. When she sees a crooked con-
crete divider or a faded fog line, or
hits a pothole that rattles her teeth,
she knows exactly who to call.

And they know exactly what she
expects.

*Kevin Miller is editor of the Oregon
Stater.*
Taking a ceremonial first walk through a new tunnel in Bremerton, Hammond is joined by (to her right) federal Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire, Congressman Norm Dicks and others. PHOTO BY DENNIS WOLVERTON