

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

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APWA Community Profile: Christopher Hagedorn

Aiming High

By Terry Paananen

Christopher Hagedorn is younger than previous individuals interviewed for these public works community profiles, but he has a keen sense of professional and personal intent, integrity and commitment to leadership and community that reflect the highest qualities of public works professionals. Chris is currently Public Works Director for the City of Carnation. He grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Tampa, Florida and from an early age he knew he wanted to be an astronaut. His professional and life choices have landed him in a part of the country and on a career path he could never have envisioned early on.

Chris has been in his current position for about a year-and-a-half. His wife, Melissa, is a biologist with WSDOT's Northwest Region and they recently moved from Mount Vernon to the Maltby area of Snohomish County with his 13-year-old son, Trevor.

Chris lost his father when he was four. When Chris was six years old his family moved from Knoxville to Tampa. After high school, he attended the University of Florida and studied aerospace engineering. His mother had moved back to Tennessee and became ill. After two years at the University of Florida, Chris returned to Tennessee to care for his mother. He enrolled at the University of Tennessee, studied geological engineering and received his Bachelor of Science degree in Geological Science.

Chris had a sister and brother-in-law in Seattle and when he came to visit, became hooked on the Pacific Northwest. He has always had a passion for hiking and mountaineering, having spent much of his free time in the Appalachian Mountains

growing up, and was immediately drawn to this area's mountains and forests as vast new areas to explore and exercise these passions. So after graduation, Chris moved out here and began working for Williamson and Associates in geophysics and marine engineering. This job took him all over the world to work on a variety of projects. He went to Southeast Asia to work on placement of an underwater fiber optic cable between Australia and Germany and to Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico to work on route development for oil pipelines to name only a couple of locations. He also worked with the USFS developing hydrologic assessments, slope stability analyses and road reconstruction and design for the Darrington Ranger District.



Chris with son Trevor on Mount Baker

Chris returned to school, attending the University of Idaho with the help of a research assistantship from the USFS. He completed his last quarter of studies through the university's video outreach program, because he had already returned to western Washington and begun working with Skagit County as an Engineering Technician 1. Chris had other offers, including the King County Department of Transportation and the US Geological Survey in Grand Junction, Colorado. But since he grew up in a small-town environment, he decided to work for Skagit County. This was his first exposure to the field of public works and by his own admission he "did not have a good feeling for what public works was all about."

Chris received his Master of Science in Civil Engineering, with a thesis entitled *Feasibility of Utilizing Remote Sensing Data to Characterize Slope Stability and Fire Severity*. The conclusions of his thesis may or may not have contributed significantly to the field, but his choice of a topic does reflect his ongoing interest in mountains and forests.

Chris worked for Skagit County from 2001 to 2005, advancing through the ranks to become, ultimately the county's design and construction manager. One of his supervisors during this time was Steve Flude, whom Chris still keeps in touch with even though Steve and his family are serving on a mission trip to Africa.

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While with Skagit County, Chris also worked in the Surface Water Division. During this time, he worked to develop the county's Flood Fight Team and strategies to combat flooding from the Skagit River. Serving in this group for two years had impacts on Chris' personal life as well as his professional development. On one very memorable occasion, Chris was assigned to monitor geotechnical drilling for the County's Helmick Road project. The county's environmental consultant, Widener and Associates, also sent a biologist to observe. Chris couldn't help but to observe not only the driller's work, but he also spent a great deal of time observing the observer from Widener and Associates. What really caught his attention was "the pretty little smile beneath the yellow hard hat." Whether wanting to avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest, or being a shy introverted engineer type, Chris did not act on his interest in this young woman until he left the County and started to work for Mount Vernon. Then he approached Melissa through an email and asked her on a date. Their first date included a hike up Mount Pilchuck in the North Cascades.

In 2005, Chris went to work for Esco Bell at the City of Mount Vernon. During this time, he would continue working to combat Skagit River flooding. Up until this time, the flood fight strategy for downtown Mount Vernon included mobilizing some 1500 volunteers to place a 1400-foot sandbag wall in an effort that would take 10-12 hours. Chris developed a strategy that utilized the city's first mobile flood wall. This is a system that uses six-foot modular sections of L-shaped members constructed of epoxy-coated marine-grade plywood and a diagonal aluminum brace. The six-foot sections are bolted to a concrete base on grade and sealed together to form a barrier against flooding. Placement of the 1400-foot mobile flood wall takes 25-30 city staff only three to four hours to install. Esco notes: "We put Chris right in the middle of a couple of difficult job situations and he responded very well. He pulled together our mobile flood wall system and I appreciated his taking the lead in our successful response to a major flood event. I enjoyed having Chris as part of our public works team and even though took the public works director opportunity at Carnation, we still keep in contact."



Chris and his wife, Melissa

Chris worked for Mount Vernon for two years, with three strong memories of that time. He is proud of the role he played in the acquisition of the mobile flood wall and associated flood flight strategy. He is also grateful for the mentorship and lessons in leadership he learned from Esco. And on the personal side, it was during this time, in June, 2006, that he married Melissa.

In July, 2007, Chris accepted the position of Public Works Director for the City of Carnation. "As with many jobs," Chris says, "the job description, interviews, and subsequent discussions, never adequately prepare someone for their first job as a public works director anywhere. And, believe me, being a public works director for a small agency is no less challenging than for large agencies." Chris acknowledges that he is fortunate to have the support of his city manager and the elected officials, and also acknowledges that the challenges and rewards are greater than he expected. "With a small agency and very limited staff, I have to develop budgets and policies, but also has to put stamps on everything sent out and put it in the mailbox."

Flooding in the City of Carnation has never been a serious problem, even though the town has on occasion been isolated as flood waters from the Tolt and Snoqualmie Rivers covered roadways and the surrounding countryside. However, last month's record rainfall and subsequent flooding could have resulted in disaster for the city, had not Chris drawn on his previous experience and developed flood flight strategies to combat potential flooding at the new waste water treatment facility. The city owns and operates the new collection system and vacuum facility that began operations in May 2008. Shortly after beginning as public works director, Chris noted a need to develop a flood fight strategy for these city-owned facilities. This strategy was implemented during the flood event in early January and kept the facility from being inundated. Chris' prior experience with Skagit County and Mount Vernon were put to appropriate use to the benefit of his new community.

When I asked Chris about what aspect of public works he finds most compelling, he stated "leadership". He has been

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fortunate to have mentors that provided high quality examples of leadership, including Esco Bell of Mount Vernon and Burt Rainier of Skagit County. Chris quickly identified the following key qualities of an effective leader:

- Understand your core purpose or mission.
- Put policies, programs, and staff in place which reflect the core purpose or mission.
- Understand that different leadership styles are needed for different people and situations.

Chris has been aware of the importance of leadership from a young age. Even his fascination with becoming an astronaut can be linked to his interest in leadership.

Chris and Melissa only recently moved from Mount Vernon to the Maltby area of Snohomish County. They live on a five-acre parcel with a wetland pond and a Redtailed Hawk nest. This is an important amenity for Melissa, who continues to work as a biologist with WSDOT's Northwest Region. Chris enjoys hiking and mountaineering, and he includes Trevor whenever he can. Chris first carried his son on his back for a hike in the mountains at the age of three months. Two years ago, Chris and Trevor (then 11 years old) climbed Mount Baker. Chris combines his interest in the outdoors and leadership by teaching mountaineering classes through the Bushwhacker Climbing Club in Seattle.

And that dream of becoming an astronaut? Well, it hasn't gone away. Chris has applied to NASA for the second time last year and is awaiting word. He is realistic about his chances but he still has the dream.

