

A Tribute to Louis J. Gambaccini

By Mortimer L. Downey

Louis J. Gambaccini, known to all as “Lou”, passed away on August 19, 2018 at the age of 87. His career bridged the fields of public administration and public transportation and he was an honored figure in both, elected as both a NAPA fellow and as a member of the Public Transportation Hall of Fame. Lou was a graduate of the University of Connecticut, earned the Bronze Star for his service in the Korean War, and graduated with an M.P.A. from Syracuse University’s Maxwell School. Throughout his career, the Maxwell School’s plaque with the Athenian Citizen’s oath was always prominent on his office walls.

Much of his career was spent at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PA), beginning as a Management Analyst. When the Port Authority took over the bankrupt Hudson and Manhattan Railroad (H&M) as part of bi-state legislation that also enabled construction of the World Trade Center, Lou was a key player, and ultimately the leader of the unit that took over the rail operation, known as the Port Authority Trans Hudson, or PATH. While PATH was critical to the movement of commuters between New York and New Jersey, the Port Authority policy had been to avoid any engagement in transit ventures that entailed operating subsidy. Lou’s management skills were challenged to build a unique organization to manage this new venture, which came with subsidy needs, a complex labor relations environment and a massive need for capital reinvestment to overcome years of bankruptcy and neglect. Lou met this challenge, turning PATH into a model transit operation with strong customer orientation and community support. A traditional response to public interest in the railroad industry was Commodore Vanderbilt’s quote that “the public be damned.” The founder of the H&M, William Gibbs McAdoo, reversed this to say “the public be pleased,” and that was Lou’s watchword as well.

After his turnaround of PATH, Lou took on or created many organizations serving the public interest. He was offered the opportunity to head the Urban Mass Transportation Administration for President Carter, but was unable to do that and retain his PA status. A lend-lease arrangement with the authority allowed him to accept New Jersey Governor Brendan Byrne’s offer to head the state transportation department. In that role, Lou designed and implemented the creation of a statewide operating authority, New Jersey Transit, to bring former private rail and bus lines under public control. To meet the system’s capital needs he campaigned successfully for a state Bond Issue and convinced the Legislature to enact a Transportation Trust Fund.

Other organizations benefitted from Lou’s management skills. He was instrumental in negotiating a merger of the two national advocacy groups for transit, which until then had been respectively rail transit and bus transit oriented, creating the American Public Transportation Association. He led an effort to broaden the scope of what was then the National Academy of Sciences’ Highway Research Board into a multi modal Transportation Research Board. Later he became the Board Chair of each of these organizations. After serving for several years as the General Manager of SEPTA, the Philadelphia area transit system, he was recruited to create a

transportation research center at Rutgers University, overseeing federal funding for a National Transit Institute. And in 1983 he founded and served as first chairman of the Council for Excellence in Government, advocating for recognition of those in public service at a time when “bureaucrat-bashing” was becoming rampant. While CEG did not survive the economic downturns in the 2000’s, much of its mission survives within NAPA, including stewardship of the Elliot L. Richardson Prize.

In each of his many roles, Lou focused on the development and mentoring of future managers, and his alumni are spread throughout the transportation industry. I was fortunate to have had a training assignment with him at the Port Authority in 1958 and later to work directly for him in a role that included advocacy with the federal government. The latter job led to me being offered a Washington opportunity that became the foundation of my later career.

Lou’s alumni, friends and family honored him in 2011 by creating the Louis J. Gambaccini Civic Engagement Lecture Series at Rutgers’ Eagleton School, which has featured such speakers as Governor Michael Dukakis, Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Chris Matthews. The series honored Lou’s “legacy in public service and his lifetime dedication to upholding the highest standards of public responsibilities,” an apt summary of his career achievements. Paraphrasing the Athenian Oath, Lou was one who unceasingly sought to quicken the sense of public duty and transmit the city greater than it was transmitted to him. Former NJ Governor Jim Florio put it well: “Lou was the consummate professional in everything he did ...and he was a nice man.”