

PROFILE



PHOTOS BY DAVID SPRAGUE

Ridership Planner: Macy Neshati, executive director at Antelope Valley Transit Authority, has received attention for his agency's goal of an all-electric fleet.

Transit Master

Macy Neshati, a former executive at electric bus maker BYD Motors, now heads green-oriented Antelope Valley Transit Authority.

By **MARK R. MADLER** Staff Reporter

A long-time transit professional, Macy Neshati came to the Antelope Valley to work for BYD Motors Inc., the Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer, first as vice president of sales, and later as senior vice president of its heavy industries division. Today, he is executive director of the Antelope Valley Transit Authority, but he has not severed ties with his former employer. BYD is making the buses that will make the authority the first all-electric public transportation agency fleet in the country. The authority serves roughly 450,000 people in a 1,200-square-mile territory in northern Los Angeles County. Neshati, whose home is in Temecula, lives in an RV on the transit authority's facility in Lancaster during the four-day workweek. He came to the U.S. from Iran at six years old and has never been interested in visiting his home country. "I am Iranian by birth, American by choice," he said. Neshati took time to talk with the Business Journal about the authority's transition to an all-electric fleet, what he has learned from that experience and his time working for BYD.

Question: What motivates you?

Answer: Being of service to the community. It's really a passion that has grown stronger and stronger over the years. Being in the

public sector and working for a transit agency and providing mobility and access to people who may or may not otherwise be able to afford it to get around is gratifying.

Why did you take the position with AVTA?

It was a great opportunity to do just that. To combine my mechanical and technical know how on buses and mechanical things in general and help an agency that is making a groundbreaking transition to an all-electric fleet.

What are some of the challenges?

We've gotten a lot of national attention and a lot of local and state attention about (the all-electric fleet). It has been a huge focus of this agency for the last three or so years. Making that commitment, generating the funding to get that commitment accomplished and then the transitional issues of getting away from diesel vehicles and building charging infrastructure. The challenge has been in doing all that, not losing the sight of our primary mission in life, the only reason we exist as a transit agency, which is to be able to get people from where they are to where they want to be, cost-effectively, safely and on time. It is keeping that dual focus and not letting one or the other over-ride the importance of the other.

How is the transition going?

Macy Neshati

TITLE: Executive Director

ORGANIZATION: Antelope Valley Transit Authority

BORN: 1954, Tehran, Iran

EDUCATION: Saint Mary's College of California, B.A. Business Management

MOST ADMIRER PERSON: Long-time friend Don Prather

HOBBIES: Building cars, golf and spending time with his grandchildren.



Do you think this will inspire other transit agencies?

It already has. Foothill (Transit, in the San Gabriel Valley) has gone public with their intent to become a 100 percent electric fleet. Transit systems throughout North America are following suit. We've hosted a lot of agencies across North America and actually South America and Central America. They have come to our facility to see how we have done

We are about not quite halfway. We have 35 buses right now out of the 75 that will be all electric. We have two out of the four in-route charging stations completed and built. Palmdale Transit Center and the Steve Owens Memorial Park have their wireless charging finished and active. We have two more that are either in design or in planning that will hopefully be in construction by early summer. We will have all four built by the end of the year. BYD is turning out the buses. We'll be receiving more buses in April, May and June and then finishing off in September.

it. It is an eye-opener in a lot of eyes to how simple you can get the charging infrastructure, how vehicles get parked and then charged. In the last six months we've entertained people from Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador. We've had groups from LADOT (Los Angeles Department of Transportation). Virtually the entire small operators' group from the California Transit Association was here in February to take a grand tour of our facility and were quite impressed with what we've done. The (Los Angeles) County Sheriff's Department has been here. They are apparently in negotiations with BYD to do a prison bus demo with their all-electric bus. It has been inspirational on many fronts.

Have you actively promoted the all-electric fleet to other transit agencies?

We are not trying to force our opinion on anyone, but anyone who is interested and wants to come see it and learn more about it, we are very open about sharing our knowledge and the lessons learned and the pitfalls and how it has worked. It is nice to be helpful. In February, the California Air Resources Board asked us to team up with them and we co-sponsored a two-day symposium in Sacramento. It was open to the public and we got a lot of transportation people there.

What have you learned from the experience?

Educate and get your organization on board, bottom to top, side to side, and have everyone pulling together. This is not something that can be done by mandate or edict. We did it early on, so it didn't take a lot of brutal lessons. Very quickly AVTA's management realized that for the program to succeed, you need buy-in from every level of the organization. It is not enough to have just the chairman of the board or the board or the CEO to say, "Yeah, we are going to do this." Educating and training and really making sure the entire organization from the cleaning crew to the operations managers, from the bus operators to the technicians, from the accountant to the marketing guy; all the way up and down the organization you've got to get that passion and buy-in that this is something that needs to be done; that it's good for us, it's good for the economy, it's good for the citizens, it's good for the environment. When you get that kind of buy-in and people become passionate about wanting to make it succeed. It really does help you steamroll over any bumps that come up along the way.

Do you see yourself as an ambassador for local industry?

It is always great to be able to support local industry, sure. If we can support BYD in their efforts, we're happy to show their products off. Just the same, if Proterra or New Flyer, one of their competitors called in and said we have a customer who really wants to see how you accomplished a zero emissions fleet, we'd be just as pleased to show them around.

How did you come to work for BYD?

I spent about 20 years in the transit industry with a company called Complete Coach Works out of Riverside. I had a brush with cancer and after I got through the surgery with that, I thought maybe it was time to retire and hang it up. So, I retired for 90 days. I was bored out of my wits. I went on my own to an APTA convention in Houston, the American Public Transportation Association. I ended up in Houston and was admiring a BYD bus in the convention hall and I ran across Stella Li there, the North American president. We just got to chatting and she asked me to consider coming to work for them. We talked for a couple of weeks and I thought it would beat being at home and retired. Not a whole lot of an enchanting story.

How did working for BYD help in the

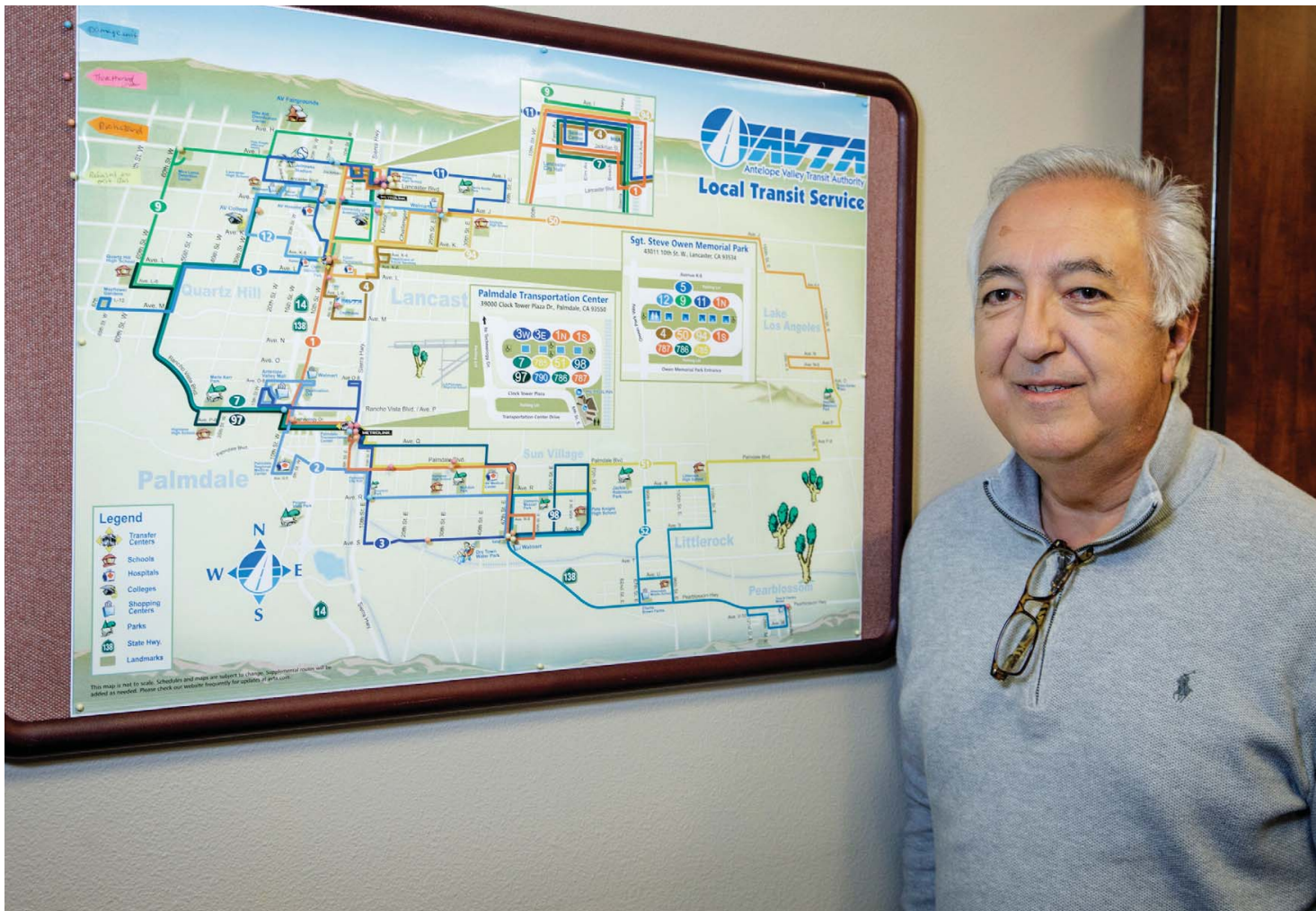


PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

Coverage: The authority serves a 1,200-square-mile section of L.A. County. Neshati has hired a firm for a regional transit plan.

transition to the AVTA position?

Working for them helped in terms of having an in-depth understanding of the product and the strengths and weaknesses and how to complement strengths and analyze any weaknesses. I have been fortunate enough to be in various leadership positions, but I have always been a gearhead at heart. I have a basic grasp of how things work and how technology works that has made it easier in terms of being able to do away with what might have been a very technical hurdle for some other person.

What was it like working for BYD?

It was very energizing. It is a very dynamic organization. It is fast-paced, it's international and global in reach and so it was a very fulfilling time. Helping them get their product launched across North America was very gratifying and fulfilling. We built a sales team that I think was on par with any in North America, including people who have been doing it longer.

What did you like about BYD?

The entrepreneurship, the spirit of innovation. The interface with our Chinese-based counterparts, and the cross-cultural learning that I didn't have in my previous background was really exciting.

Did you have a chance to go to China?

A lot. It's a remarkable country. They are very progressive, very willing to show what they can do and show their technology and prowess and their abilities. It is a very hard-working, dedicated and spirited country. We're trying to get our 75-bus fleet to convert to all electric and that is a huge accomplishment in North America. In China, they have already converted their first all-electric bus fleet. Shenzhen Eastern Bus Co., I believe, is the proper name, is running roughly 17,000 all-electric BYD zero emission buses.

What are the agency's expansion plans?

It is growing population. Lockheed is growing, Northrop is growing, Boeing is growing. At Mojave Air and Space Port adjacent to Edwards, you have Virgin Galactic and The Spaceship Co. You have all this growth and

expansion out here and it is a challenge for us to keep up with that. Again, if you go back to the roots of transit in the 1890s, it was invented to get people from home to work and work to home. The area around us has grown so fast that we are really challenged to get back on that path. Are we servicing Plant 42 adequately, are we getting people to and from work from Northrop Grumman, Lockheed, Boeing? The answer is no. We need to do a better job there.

You recently started service to Edwards Air Force, didn't you?

Edwards Air Force Base had not been served in a lot of years. We have service running out there now. It's starting to grow. It got off to a slow start, but I am optimistic watching the numbers creep up every day. We're getting service started to Mojave. We are just completing a micro-transit study to better serve the east (Antelope) Valley. I think we can do a lot better job (instead) of sending a 40-foot bus an hour out of town to pick up people and bring them back in. It's a long trip for the individuals. I think we can do a much more effective route by having local circulators out in that area and having transit that gets them to a connection point that will get them into town a lot quicker. We have a lot on our plate and a lot of ambitious goals on how we can better serve the community. We are learning to reach out and partner up with organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, veterans' organizations, senior groups and become more involved in how we can serve their needs. In that process we have contracted with a consulting firm to do a regional transit plan to take a global snapshot of the whole northern L.A. County area, which has not been adequately done in at least 10 years and really redefine how our routes can better serve the community.

Would the agency ever go to, say, Tejon Ranch, another area with a lot of business growth?

I wouldn't say no to anything. What we are also doing is having a more robust dialogue with our adjoining transit systems, like Kern

County Transit and Santa Clarita Transit, on how we can complement each other. Maybe we can meet each other halfway at some hubs, get our people to their system and then let them pick it up and take it from there. I think you'll see a lot of that before the end of the year.

What are your thoughts on the high-speed rail system and the station planned for Palmdale?

We don't have a horse in that race. It is a very polarizing topic and I don't have a reason to get involved with that. If they build it, we will serve it.

Who is someone you admire?

I have been very fortunate and have had a lot of great mentors. One guy who has really meant a lot to me and we are still touch and he's a dear friend is a gentleman named Don Prather. He hired me back in 1977, I think it was. It was early in my career, as an inventory control and parts manager. He mentored me and convinced me I was really a salesman and pushed me out into the world. He stood there and cheered for me the last 40 years. He was a very important mentor to me.

What are your hobbies and interests outside the workplace?

I am a hot rodder. I love building cars. I have not built one in about five years, so I am getting the itch to build a hot rod. I take two years to build them, I drive them for a year, I take them to a couple shows and get some oohs and aahs, and then I get bored and I sell them. I drag raced when I was a kid. I love golf. These days though it is the simple pleasures of getting to hang out with the grandkids and teach them a thing or two.

What was the last book you read?

I am re-reading "From Good to Great." I admire the author (Jim Collins). He has a keen sense of dissecting businesses and identifying how big companies become and stay great and how other companies fail. There is another book called "How the Mighty Fall" (also by Collins) that's a great read, too.