

My Retirement

Udai P. Singh



It was April 2014 when Mike Tilchin and Lisa Forrest of the Washington, DC office organized and participated in a celebration of my 40th anniversary as a full-time employee of CH2M HILL (my first and only job). I enjoyed the party at the Oakland, California, office with colleagues from several offices, friends, and family. That event got me thinking about the next phase of my life – retirement. By summer I had decided to go part time from 2015 and fully retire in 2 or 3 years. As luck would have it, all of us “old timers” got an offer and incentive from the CEO in early fall to voluntarily retire. In my case the incentive amounted to payment of about one full year of current salary. It was a no-brainer, and with mixed emotions I took the offer and retired on December 19, 2014.

The next couple of months were intense fun, doing several things I had put on hold for a while. My wife (Manju) and I went to parks, beaches, musical concerts, matinee operas and movies, etc., and I caught up on reading and movies/shows that I had on my list for a while but had not found the time for them. No stress, and full flexibility of schedule, something I had not experienced for a long time! In the meantime, some of CH2M HILL’s main competitors somehow found out about my status and kept sending me unilateral job offers, mostly to continue the type of work I had been doing at CH2M HILL. “Been there, done that” was the reason I politely declined all offers. Manju and I paid a visit to a friend (Hersh) in the Bay Area when we heard that he was recovering from a major heart procedure. He owned a small consulting engineering firm and had worked with me as my team subcontractor for a couple of decades before I retired. We were happy to see that he was out of danger and on his way to full recovery in a few months. But toward the end of that visit he requested me to join his company and help him out. My inclination was to say “no” but I responded politely that I will think about it.

At home I didn’t think about the request, but Manju soon brought it up. I am not sure if she saw that I had started missing my professional career a little or if she did not want me in the house all the time. She encouraged me to look into this opportunity seriously and help out Hersh in his time of need. Within a couple of weeks I went to Hersh’s office and told him that while I would like to help him, I will not be his employee and will work only part-time (no more than 20 hours a week) on things I feel comfortable with. Hersh agreed to all my conditions. So I registered a sole-source proprietor company and became a consultant to Hersh’s engineering firm. Initially I ran his environmental department, but eventually found a capable in-house person and handed that responsibility over to her, much to my relief. Since then I have been helping Hersh’s company in business development and assisting and mentoring project and program managers on environmental projects. My original idea of phased retirement seems to be working out, except over a longer period. For the first year and a half I worked about 20 hours a week, the next two years about 16 and 12 hours a week, respectively. For the last year or so I am down to 8 to 10 hours a week, but cannot realistically cut down anymore without totally quitting (which is a

possibility in the next year or two). It has been enjoyable to stay involved in the career I liked, and to cherry-pick the type and amount of work.

Manju and I have done extensive traveling after CH2M HILL, some domestically but mostly overseas. With friends we had earlier taken cruises in Alaska and the Eastern Mediterranean; and the last two during this “retirement” were a 12-day Baltic Sea cruise and a 13-day Central America cruise. The last one reminded me of some of my colleagues from the Oakland office who had worked extensively on the program management of the design and construction of the new Panama Canal, especially when our cruise ship went through the



Udai and wife Manju on the Berlin Wall during the Baltics Cruise shore excursion.

docks of the Canal. These cruises were very enjoyable especially because I had planned, organized, and managed them for my group of 60 to 70 people, mostly my classmates (with their families) from college. We were all set to do our next cruise with the same group in July 2020 for 13-days around the British Isles, but the pandemic cancelled it.

Some of the more enjoyable trips were to my two schools in India (Patna and Jaipur) to attend the Golden Jubilee celebration of my graduating class. I met most of my classmates after 50 years. I bonded so well with the Jaipur classmates that Manju and I joined them in another reunion two years later in a historic fort in Rajasthan (Kumbhalgarh whose walls guarding the fort are second in length only to the Great Wall of China). I also found time to organize the 45th year reunion of my undergraduate class from IIT Kanpur, India at the IIT campus for 3 days; nearly 90 classmates plus spouses and a couple of professors from our time came from all over the globe to have a gala time. It has been so much fun at these reunions that I will soon start planning for the Golden Jubilee Reunion (in 2022) of my undergraduate class. Manju and I have been to India at least twice a year during the last 5 years, mostly to visit family and friends. We have a house in Rajasthan and another one in Bihar; they are locked up most of the year and have caretakers. In addition, we have taken land sightseeing trips in a few other countries in conjunction with my professional engineering society meetings (more on that a bit later).

Some of you know that I had been actively involved with engineering societies most of my career. A part of this involvement includes publishing technical papers and books and making technical presentations at conferences, universities, and other organizations. I have continued to do that during my “retirement.” Now I am up to about 60 published papers, co-authored 5 books, and edited 8 books, all in civil engineering (mostly environment and water resources). And I continue to go to conferences and universities to speak there, but mostly to be in touch with people I have known in my profession all my life and to mingle with young future leaders of our profession.

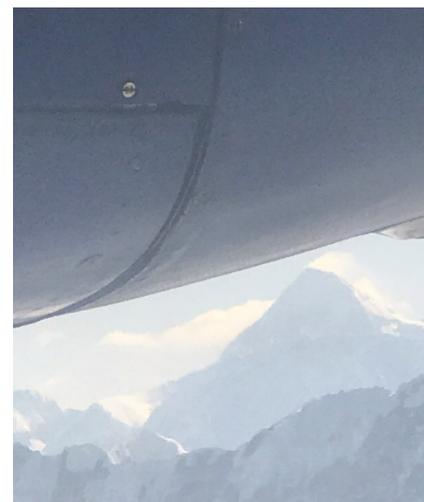
You may also remember that I had been very active with the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) and Water Environment Federation (WEF) during my CH2M HILL days. I continued my professional society activities after retiring from CH2M HILL, even more so. This included leadership activities at ASCE, especially within their global strategy. At ASCE's request I organized and chaired their first International Conference in 2017 in New Delhi, India, on Challenges of Sustainable Infrastructure Development in Emerging Economies. I also became active in the Asian Civil Engineering Coordinating Council (ACECC). ACECC was founded in 1999 by 5 countries (Japan, Philippines, S. Korea, Taiwan, and USA) and by now 9 other countries have also become members (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Indonesia, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Australia). ACECC is bringing civil engineers from its member countries together and is working on activities to transfer knowledge among them. For the last several years I have been on its Executive Committee (Governing Board) as a member representing USA. ACECC holds its Civil Engineering Conference in the Asian Region (CECAR) every 3 years, and I had the privilege and honor of organizing and being the Conference Chair of the CECAR in 2016 in Honolulu, Hawaii – an exciting week with the smartest civil engineers from about 30 countries in a beautiful setting!



With keynote speaker U.S. Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard at the 2016 CECAR in Hawaii.

ACECC provided us an opportunity to travel and see more of the world. Its Executive Committee meets in person every 6 months. The 2-day meeting, including evening dinners and cultural festivals, plus one day of seminar and technical and social tours are hosted by a member organization. Manju and I take a few extra days on our own to travel and do sightseeing in that country. For example, after the meeting and CECAR conference in Jakarta, we went to Bali for a week for vacation. The Executive Committee meetings are usually followed by a half to full day of technical seminar focused on a pertinent topic. For example, just before the 2016 meeting in Kathmandu, experts from ACECC countries toured the earthquake damaged areas in Nepal, and after the meeting we participated in a full day seminar on the earthquake with practitioners, academicians, and decision makers from the government. Among the post-meeting sightseeing tour activities,

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Looking at Mount Everest from airplane window.

the one that stands out is the 2-hour flight along the Himalayan range with Mt. Everest and other peaks seen clearly from the window of the airplane.

The next meeting in Ulanbaatar, Mongolia, was held in late September just before the temperature went down to below freezing for the next several months. It also gave us an opportunity, after the meeting, to see the countryside and life of the nomads, including having lunch with a nomad family in their ger (portable round tent). After the meeting in Melbourne, Australia in 2018 we spent a week touring Australia followed by 2 weeks of sightseeing in New Zealand.



At the partially damaged Patan Durbar historic site near Kathmandu, Nepal after the 2015 earthquake.



At the outdoor movie sets of "Lord of the Rings" in New Zealand.

The host at the ACECC meeting usually gives us a tour of a prominent civil engineering project. After the Hanoi, Vietnam, meeting we went to a construction site of a new bridge. This was followed by a half-day cruise of Ha Long Bay.

After the Dhaka, Bangladesh, meeting the hosts took us to their largest bridge under construction (Padma Bridge over the delta of the Brahmaputra River). It is about 50 miles away from Dhaka, and our bus was escorted in front and back by military trucks with soldiers holding guns. At that time Bangladesh was having violent demonstrations all over the country, and the hosts didn't want to take a chance with our



Boat ride on Ha Long Bay, Vietnam.

security. A colleague from Hong Kong sitting next to me in the bus commented that this is the second time he was being escorted by military police. I curiously asked him about his first time, to which he responded, “when I was arrested in Hong Kong in a protest march”!

Occasionally we have prominent decision makers join us for parts of our ACECC meetings. The Philippines undersecretary of public works, a civil engineer, attended the Manila meeting. In Taiwan, after the meeting, the hosts took us to their Lantern Festival where we were seated in the section of the podium directly behind the President, and we had an opportunity to meet him and shake his hand. In September 2019 we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the founding of ACECC after the executive committee meeting in Goa, India, and conducted a seminar on reducing corruption in civil engineering projects, which was attended by about 200 professionals, with speakers from several ACECC countries. The Chief Minister of Goa joined us for part of that day. At the Goa meeting I was elected the next Secretary General (equivalent to CEO) of ACECC. Currently I am in transition from the current Secretary General from Japan and will assume this position for a 6-year term starting in October 2020. I will not be paid for this job, though ACECC will bear my travel expenses. I expect to spend about 10 to 15 hours a week in this position, delegating routine tasks to staff (full time and salaried) at the secretariat.



Touring Humayun's tomb in Delhi, India.

My “retirement” has been exciting, enjoyable, and busy, different from what I had thought it would be when I left CH2M HILL. I am enjoying spending more time with family and friends while keeping engaged to a lesser extent on the type of consulting I did at CH2M HILL. And it is very satisfying giving back to my profession, meeting and interacting with fellow professionals and future young leaders, and utilizing related opportunities to see more of the world.