

BAC Member Walter Allen Creates Jobs and Diversity

By Karen Massie

Most college students wait until they graduate before opening a new business. But Walter Allen was in graduate school when he decided to launch his company. "I was at [University of California] Berkeley getting my master's degree and quite frankly, I needed some cash," Allen laughed. It was 1994 and **Acumen Building Enterprise** was born.

Before Allen, a Navy veteran, received a Master of Science degree in Civil Engineering and Project Controls, he was consulting for accounting giant Coopers and Lybrand. "I came to Sacramento about five days a month," Allen explained. "I was dealing with JP Morgan and other banks who were financing large energy users - gas turbine powerplants

for SMUD (Sacramento Municipal Utility District), Carson Ice-Gen Project, Campbell Soup and Proctor & Gamble. I checked on their invoices, progress and work quality."

Fast forward 25 years and Acumen is now certified as a Small Business in California. The company focuses on systems engineering, infrastructure and technology and has worked for major transit systems in Washington, D.C., New York, San Diego, Los Angeles, Hawaii, Portland and San Francisco. Acumen's largest client is BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit), which uses a bill-to-bill changer and a contactless smart card reader developed by Allen's firm. The smart card system reads and writes to integrated circuits found in smart cards used by passengers to



board trains and busses.

No longer a one-man operation, Allen employs 45 people. He said, "Now, I have managers doing finance and engineering. I have more support and the issues are more complex, but I understand challenges small businesses face."

It's also why Allen garnered a spot on the Authority's **Business Advisory Council (BAC)**



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Walter Allen
President/CEO
Acumen Building Enterprise

Acumen Building Enterprise founder **Walter Allen** (left) and senior systems engineer **Doug Van Blaricom** review the 1st shipment of AcuFare 135tm units designed for BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit), the public transportation system that services the San Francisco Bay Area.

representing the **Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO)**. “The organization looks out for the interests of African-Americans and other minorities,” Allen explained. “We want to make sure there is a fair distribution of business opportunities for everyone.”

COMTO was founded in 1971 to help minority professionals in the transportation industry. The group provides networking, training, education and professional development. According to Allen, minority professionals flocked to the transportation industry for nearly 40 years, but their numbers are declining. “Ten years ago, we had at least 16 African-Americans who were general managers of large transit systems. Now, maybe we have four,” he said. “People are retiring and no minorities are replacing them. We’ve got to do some retraining and get young people interested in the industry.”

He said COMTO chapters around the nation offer scholarships to deserving students. He’s doing his part to create jobs and a diverse workforce. “Every quarter, I make a concerted effort to bring one recent college grad to Acumen,” he explained. “At first, they help out and do research for me or tasks assigned by other managers. Then, they’re assigned to a project. They also receive exposure to the transit industry, major infrastructure development trends, safety training and they undergo a background check. It takes about three to six months to give them the basics to launch a career and be in demand.”

Most of the students are from University of California campuses at Davis, San Francisco and Berkeley. Allen hopes some of them will stay with him. “Ultimately, I want my company to continue. As I move on to the next phase of my life, I’m looking for my successor,” he declared.



1. Acumen President/CEO **Walter Allen** (right) and one of his staff members discuss a transportation project. The company focuses on systems engineering, infrastructure and technology and has worked for major transit systems in Washington, D.C., New York, San Diego, Los Angeles, Hawaii, Portland and San Francisco. Acumen's largest client is the San Francisco Area BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit).

2. Acumen developed a bill-to-bill changer that is installed in all BART stations in the San Francisco Area. The machines quickly exchange \$10 and \$20 bills for \$5 bills. Customers can use the change in BART ticketing machines.

3. AcuFare 135th units were designed by Acumen for BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit). The units allow customer service agents to read information and transit transaction history for passengers from contactless fare cards or devices. If the cards or devices are malfunctioning the agent can see the information and come up with a remedy.

4. Allen sits on the Authority's Business Advisory Council (BAC) representing the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO). The organization was founded in 1971 to help minority professionals in the transportation industry. Allen said, “We want to make sure there is a fair distribution of business opportunities for everyone.”