Alumnus Gives $17 Million to Name USC Civil and Environmental Engineering Department

*Gift from downtown developer Sonny Astani will nurture vision of livable, sustainable "Megacities"*

Sonny Astani, whose soaring high-rises and philanthropy are remaking downtown Los Angeles, has given $17 million to name the University of Southern California’s department of civil and environmental engineering. The gift is the largest ever to name such a department, and is the fourth department naming gift for the USC Viterbi School of Engineering since it began its $300-million fundraising initiative in 2001.

USC President Steven B. Sample hailed the gift by Astani, who earned a masters degree in industrial and systems engineering from USC in 1978, two years after arriving in the US from his native Iran.

“Sonny Astani is a remarkable Trojan who is transforming Los Angeles,” said Sample. “He understands the crucial role civil and environmental engineers must play as more and more people live in cities. We are deeply grateful at USC not only for his exceptional gift but for his majestic vision of urban life.”

Yannis C. Yortsos, dean of the Viterbi School of Engineering, expressed his gratitude for Astani’s gift and said the department would be known from now on as the Sonny Astani Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering.

"Thirty years ago, by mere good fortune, I ended up in the best university, in the best city, in the best country in the world,” said Sonny Astani. “This is a gift to both USC and Los Angeles. It is my hope that it will allow a new generation of civil and environmental engineers to rise to the increasingly complex challenges created by the urbanization of Los Angeles and the changes to the global environment we are now facing."

Yortsos noted that civil engineering, the oldest engineering discipline, remains the branch of engineering that is closest to the lives of people, particularly in cities. “Civil engineers provide homes, water, sanitation, bridges, tunnels, roads and civil infrastructure and environmental engineering expertise is critical to solving problems of pollution and micro-climate.”

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"By 2030 almost five billion people, or 60 percent of the entire world, will live in cities. This raises huge challenges for civil and environmental engineers, challenges now known in the profession as those of 'megacities,’ said Yortsos. “Internationally we see an emerging vision for civil and environmental engineering as a major force for improvement and enhancement of cities, not only for Los Angeles, but for major urban centers around the world.”

And, Yortsos continued, “Astani shares our belief that civil engineering is vital to achieve a critical need for the 21st century: cities designed to be highly functional, healthful and inspiring; environments that celebrate humanity.”

Astani is the chairman of Astani Enterprises, a Beverly Hills based development concern. His firm owns or operates approximately 4,000 apartment units throughout Southern California and is currently developing approximately 2,000 units of condominiums and lofts in downtown Los Angeles with a total value in excess of $1 Billion. These include five iconic residential towers and two loft buildings: the Concerto, a mixed-use twin 32-story towers with 27,000 square feet of shops, restaurant and spa; the 38-story Grand; and Vero at 1234 Wilshire Blvd.

Last year, Astani Enterprises made a $1.5 million donation to the Skid Row Housing Trust, completing funding for a downtown apartment complex, Abbey Apartments, that will house 115 of Los Angeles' mentally ill homeless when it opens in next year.

An Iranian immigrant who received a Distinguished Alumnus Award from the USC Viterbi School, Astani serves on the Executive Committee of the Central City Association, on the Board of Councilors of the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, and on the Leadership Council for USC’s Lusk Center for Real Estate Development. He is also a board member of the Pacific Council for International Affairs.

A resident of Pacific Palisades, Astani and his wife Jo have three children and they are part of a diverse immediate family with ties to 10 nations. His hobbies include yoga, cycling, swimming, Tai Chi and Karate, in which he holds a 2nd degree black belt. He is currently the chairman of the Tenshin-Kai Tai Chi & Karate in Culver City with branches in the U.S. and Japan.

The Astani donation is the seventh multimillion-dollar donation from a USC engineering alumnus in the last six years, following earlier gifts by Andrew J. Viterbi (naming the school); by Daniel J. Epstein, Ming Hsieh, and John Mork, (naming the departments of Industrial and Systems Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Chemical Engineering and Materials Science); by Mark Stevens (creating the USC Stevens Institute) and by Kenneth Klein (creating the USC Viterbi Center for Undergraduate Engineering Life). The department naming is the third department naming in the Viterbi School in as many years.

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