

Federal Transportation Dollars Are A Key Factor For Smart Growth

A Report on the American Planning Association Policy Conference, May 11-13, 2003.
by Hannah Twaddell, Renaissance Planning Group

Equitable, adequate funding for regional transportation planning and multi-modal projects were almost universally cited priorities for the upcoming reauthorization of the federal transportation bill among participants at APA's recent policy conference in Washington DC.

Speakers from a broad array of groups including APA, the Association of MPOs, the Surface Transportation Policy Project, the National League of Cities, Defenders of Wildlife, the National Center for Bicycling and Walking, the National Governor's Association, and Smart Growth America, to name a few, were largely in agreement that the fundamental principles of the current transportation bill, the Transportation Efficiency Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) were sound. The focus for almost every group as they work with legislators on the reauthorization is to ensure those principles are funded and implemented. The new bill, variously known as TEA-3, SAFETEA, and even GreenTEA by a hopeful few, is slated for approval by September 30, 2003

A delegation of three Virginia area planners talked with staff members from the offices of Senators Warner and Allen, and several House Delegates during Planners Day on Capitol Hill. Talking points on TEA-21 reauthorization carried by the group which included Hannah Twaddell from Renaissance Planning Group, Arlington resident and former Berkeley zoning director Matthew LeGrant, and Lisa Chiblow of McGuire Woods Battle & Boothe, focused on the following key objectives:

- 1) Increase funding from 1% to 2% for MPO planning
- 2) Support MPO training and capacity building programs;
- 3) Ensure equity among funding for various transportation modes by
 - a) Keeping intact set-aside programs such as Transportation Enhancements,
 - b) Maintaining the 1:4 transit/highway ratio and
 - c) Ensuring transit programs, particularly the New Starts program will continue with an 80 percent federal match (not cut to 50 percent); and
- 4) Support public participation programs and scenario-building technologies.

A full report from the conference will be published in the upcoming APA Transportation Planning Division newsletter. For more information on the conference and the status of TEA-21 reauthorization, visit the APA website at www.planning.org.

Congressman Earl Blumenauer Urges Planners to Help Government “Do It Right”

The country and Capitol Hill are more deeply divided than they’ve been in 50 years, said Blumenauer during his keynote address. Forty states are verging on fiscal crises, while Congress is looking at tax cuts. Confusion over domestic security could turn all our federal agencies into enclaves instead of institutions open to the public. On the international scene, long-time allies are angry with the US, and we are becoming more entangled in Middle Eastern political crises. And there is a host of other controversial domestic issues on legislators’ plates.

Meanwhile, he continued, there is also more of a grassroots movement than ever to push government to “do it right.” Five key principles he noted citizens are pushing to make livable communities work include:

- 1) Safe public spaces created through thoughtful design;
- 2) Sustainable systems that don’t rely on endless consumption;
- 3) Choice in where to live and how to travel;
- 4) Vigorous, aggressive and even contentious participation; and
- 5) Operating from a regional and statewide context.

The Department of Defense, observed Blumenauer, is the largest manager of infrastructure in the world, and it is deeply damaged by sprawl. Partnerships of local communities and the DoD, he suggested, could have a huge transforming effect on the Department as well as opening up millions of acres for community redevelopment.

In addition to TEA-3, he urged planners to pay attention to the reauthorization of Amtrak and the Aviation program as critical to better transportation. For example, he noted, one-third of our flights are less than 350 miles and might be served better and more cost-effectively by rail; and airport passenger fees could be allowed to fund mass transit to the airport.

Blumenauer concluded by suggesting that a well-organized coalition of architects, landscape architects, engineers and planners could be one of the most powerful lobbies in DC.

Making the Link Between Smart Growth & Budget Crises, Health Costs, and Security

During the opening general session, APA Executive Director Paul Farmer said the key smart growth issues for planners include transportation, environmental stewardship and housing choice for the changing faces of America, particularly the growing sectors of empty nesters and immigrants. Our job, he said, is to demonstrate alternatives, cultivate leadership, and figure out how to pay for the public good.

Farmer noted that smart growth opponents first tried to ignore it, then tried to co-opt it by repackaging it into their own agendas, and are now attacking it. Well-funded radical property rights groups, he said, are taking advantage when smart growth advocates are not well-organized, and they are making big inroads at the ballot box and through lawsuits. See www.ti.org for a good view of smart growth opposition.

Governors are realizing that uncontrolled growth results in spiraling costs for public services, and are starting to see the connection between smart growth and the bottom line, according to Rose Krasnow of the National Governor's Association. Awareness is also growing about the link between public health and smart growth, given the prominence of rising health care costs in every state.

Several speakers cited signs of good smart growth activity at the federal, state, and local levels., but most agreed the critical missing link bringing it all together is visioning and authority at the regional level. A few examples of regional initiatives (some led by the business sector) are the Greater Atlanta Regional Transportation Authority; Envision Utah; Metropolis 2020 in Chicago; and the consolidation of Louisville & Jefferson County KY in order to increase economic competitiveness.

Wide Variety of Organizations Promote Transportation Planning & Multi-Modal Funding

Anne Canby of the Surface Transportation Planning Project (STPP, www.transact.org), and former Delaware Secretary of Transportation, said key principles for STPP, which align closely with those of APA, include:

- 1) Make transportation investments fit the larger community vision;
- 2) Make decisions collaboratively; and
- 3) Make the system function as a whole.

The challenge for State DOTs, Canby noted, is to get decisions closer to citizens and to land use decision-makers, to change the focus from moving vehicles to enhancing communities. That means adopting a fix-it-first policy, making equitable investments in transit, pedestrian, bike, and road networks, and ensuring that transportation serves local resident's needs such as getting to work.

Key transportation committees to watch, according to Jeff Squires of the US Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works, include Senate Transportation (Jeffords, chair) which will lead TEA-21 reauthorization; Environment & Public Works, in charge of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA); Banking, in charge of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA); and Commerce, which deals with Rail, Freight & Aviation. Senator Jeffords, said Squires, is focusing on four key pillars in reauthorization: 1) safety (the highway fatality rate is down, but the numbers are up); 2) asset management (fix-it-first); 3) congestion; and 4) goods movement.

Deron Lovass of the Natural Resources Defense Council (www.nrdc.org/cities/smartgrowth) said their group's reauthorization priorities include:

- 1) Keeping the transit/highway program allocation ratio of one to four;
- 2) Maintaining a match ratio for all transit programs of 80 percent federal/20 percent state & local, same as highway programs, especially New Starts which the Administration is proposing be reduced to 50 percent federal; and
- 3) Doubling funds for the Congestion Mitigation & Air Quality (CMAQ) program.

National League of Cities transportation committee staffer Melissa White said the group includes about 200 local elected officials. In addition to supporting issues such as those outlined by APA, they've crafted a Congestion Bill that targets more funds to urban areas with the worst congestion. To raise more revenues for transportation, the NLC is supporting ethanol taxes, indexing the gas tax to rise with the Consumer Price Index; cracking down on gas tax evasion, and a general gas tax increase. In addition, they are proposing the use of expanded CMAQ funds in attainment areas as a preventive measure, and urging states and federal agencies to flex National Highway System and Minimum Guarantee program funds to transit (it's already enabled, but none has been flexed to date).

Bill Wilkinson of the National Center for Bicycling & Walking pointed out asthma is the fastest-growing chronic disease in America, thanks in no small part to traffic congestion. In addition, Type II diabetes is showing up in so many children it's no longer called "adult onset diabetes." The reason: skyrocketing childhood obesity rates because children so rarely walk anywhere. Some of his ideas to improve public health through TEA-21 reauthorization include:

- 1) Set community health outcomes as transportation planning measures - read the ISTEA preamble (it was dropped from TEA-21) and return to its fundamental principles;
- 2) Consider forming State Planning Organizations instead of having DOT's do planning, and suballocating all funds to regions except intra/interstate programs;
- 3) Make bicycle & pedestrian systems part of all good road design;
- 4) Specifically include Safe Routes to School in the reauthorization.

Alex Taft of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO, www.ampo.org), said adequate funding for MPOs is a big issue. MPOs get one percent of highway funds, and states get two percent. Yet there are many new MPOs as a result of the 2000 census and all MPOs, regardless of size, have to produce a Long Range Plan & Transportation Improvement Program, with no minimum standards or adequate funds for staff or training.

Taft also noted that only 80 percent of the CMAQ program has been obligated. This is because it's a hard program for states to administer, since many of the projects are Management & Operations initiatives. There is also no national standard for states to have a formula distribution of CMAQ funds; MPO's in states with a formula program get their CMAQ funds more quickly and get the projects done faster.

AMPO's key focus areas for reauthorization include:

- 1) Raising the planning funds for MPOs from 1% to 2% in both FHWA and FTA budgets;
- 2) Suballocating a percentage of Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds to all MPOs, regardless of size;
- 3) Suballocating CMAQ funds directly to MPO's to get projects done faster;
- 4) Including performance-based Management & Operations objectives in MPO plans to make sure the plans result in more efficient transportation systems;
- 5) Expanding eligibility for freight projects; and
- 6) Improving the air quality conformity process with more of a focus on planning and less on manipulating the funds.

Smart Growth America, according to Legislative Director Beth Osborne, is focusing on the need for more scenario planning technologies that allow citizens to get engaged in the planning process. A compendium of current tools is available at www.placematters.com. Related priorities for TEA-3 include

- 1) Scenario-building technical assistance programs and a catalogue of tools;
- 2) Funding for scenario planning by non-governmental organizations (NGO's);
- 3) Allowing scenarios to be used for NEPA planning; and
- 4) Using locally set performance measures; and funds to develop and share GIS among agencies.

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