

SERVING RURAL AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) provided more surface transportation resources for rural areas and small communities than ever before and the Safe Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2003 (SAFETEA) submitted to congress in May 2003, will enhance the TEA-21 gains. The Department is working to ensure that people in rural areas are involved in transportation planning and decision making, and share in the benefits flowing from a transportation system that:

- Improves safety and reduces the human and material costs associated with the operation of the transportation system;
- Allows residents of rural areas and small communities access to the destinations and goods that improve their quality of life;
- Provides the transportation service that will afford small communities and rural areas the opportunity to fulfill their economic growth and trade potential;
- Enhances the social strength and cohesiveness of small communities and protects the natural environment; and
- Maintains national security and border integrity.

The Department's goal is to be the point from which we can realize a transportation system that better serves small communities and rural areas. We endeavor to further involve rural communities in the planning processes by which transportation investment decisions are made. There are several key challenges to support transportation in small communities and rural areas, including: engaging local officials in the transportation planning process; improving safety as travel levels continue to increase; preserving and enhancing the environment; supporting economic growth; and responding to social and demographic changes.

ENHANCING TRANSPORTATION DECISION-MAKING

Transportation Planning

The US Department of Transportation (DOT) seeks to engage a wide variety of stakeholders in the transportation planning process. As a result of the requirements in TEA-21, the DOT is increasing the participation of local rural officials in the transportation planning process by exploring consultation methods and processes that are effective for each state and their local and rural stakeholders.

Transportation responsibilities differ from state to state. Some states have direct responsibility for 10 to 20 percent of the roads in their state while others have responsibility for over 90 percent. State responsibilities also vary in the oversight of rural transit systems and other transportation services which include planning for, owning, and operating airports; managing and funding branch and short line railroads, and planning and funding commuter rail programs.

The Federally-Mandated Transportation Planning Process

The transportation planning process is the "gateway" to access Federal-aid highway and transit funds. It enhances the quality and scope of the information on which elected officials and policy makers can base their decisions regarding transportation investments and helps ensure better, more informed decision-making. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) rely on the statewide transportation planning process as the primary mechanism for cooperative decision-making. This means local officials and those who anticipate using Federal transportation funds must be involved in the planning process.

Current law recognizes that rural officials are the decision makers closest to rural transportation problems. Their involvement in the transportation planning process is paramount for a collaborative and coordinated resolution of rural transportation issues and problems.

- *The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA)* required, for the first time, the establishment of a statewide transportation planning process. It also required that Federally-funded transportation projects be planned and approved through that process.
- *The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21)* continued the requirement for a statewide transportation planning process; it also placed emphasis on the involvement of rural local officials in the statewide planning process, including project selection.

The State Role in Statewide Transportation Planning

Each state has developed its own process for transportation planning and for making transportation decisions. In some states, the legislature is involved in approving capital investment programs; others have independent entities (commissions, boards, authorities, etc.) that are responsible for transportation decisions. In all cases, elected officials at every level need good information on which to base their decisions, and the planning process should provide this while respecting each state's unique requirements.

The state level transportation planning process requires two major products:

1. The **transportation plan**, a long range (20 years), multi-modal future vision for the mobility of goods and people, that considers factors that may affect or be affected by local and regional transportation investments.
2. The **statewide transportation improvement program (STIP)**, a short term (3 years) list of projects to be financed partially with Federal funds but within the anticipated funding levels available to the state.

Rural Transportation Planning Differences

Existing planning techniques can be used in rural transportation planning. However, their effectiveness depends on the local circumstances within which they are applied. Rural transportation planning is relatively new, to both those traditionally involved in transportation planning and to those not. Engaging a variety of stakeholders is essential to addressing all rural and small community transportation issues from the agricultural transportation community to economic development agencies and other established planning entities.

PROMOTING AND IMPROVING SAFETY

Although we have made great progress in highway safety, even as travel has increased dramatically, highway deaths and injuries continue to overwhelm all other transportation-related deaths and injuries. The greater isolation and distances in rural areas present special problems from a safety perspective. Certain types of crashes, including rail-highway grade crossing and run-off-the-road, are more prevalent in rural areas. Also, the distance to medical services can be longer than in metropolitan areas, thereby lengthening the response time that can be critical in treating crash victims.

Crashes in rural areas are more likely to result in fatalities due to a combination of factors including extreme terrain, faster speeds, more alcohol involvement, and the longer time intervals from the advent of a crash to medical treatment due to delays in locating crash victims and the distance to medical treatment centers.

Promoting and improving safety is our highest priority.

- Nearly to 80 percent of the Nation's roadway miles are in rural areas
- Over 58 percent of the total fatalities occur in rural areas;
- The fatality rate for rural areas (per 100 million vehicles miles of travel) is more than twice that of urban areas;
- Bicyclists' fatalities in rural areas constitute 35 percent of national whole.

The priority safety areas are to:

- Reduce single-vehicle run-off-road fatal crashes - two-thirds of which occur in rural areas.
- Increase seat belt use and reduce alcohol-impaired driving nationwide.
- Improve bicycling and walking safety -- the prevalent methods of transportation in some rural areas.
- Continue aviation accident rate reductions.
- Reduce highway-railway grade crossing crashes.

PROVIDING MOBILITY AND REBUILDING AMERICA'S INFRASTRUCTURE

The ability to make clear distinctions between rural infrastructure and that which serves the Nation is limited by an absence of data unique to rural settings and transportation services. Nonetheless, based on the available data, some observations can be made.

- Compared to urban roadways, rural roads and highways are in relatively good condition overall. However, about one-third of rural interstates and other rural arterials are in poor or mediocre condition.
- Similarly, fewer rural bridges overall are deficient than is the case for the Nation as a whole, but upwards of one-fifth of all rural bridges are deficient.
- Progress was made in improving highway and bridge conditions under ISTEA and continues under TEA-21.
- Critical problems can arise in specific circumstances and locations, and the ability to deal with them needs to be in place.
- There is no data to identify rural transit or railroad infrastructure.
- Typical rural transit vehicles - small buses and vans - are older than those used in urban areas. Yet, the greater problem in rural transit is more the level of service than vehicle condition.
- There is little comprehensive condition data for railroads serving rural areas. Some information suggests growing track maintenance and condition problems for the short-line and low-density railroads.

- Rural aviation has significant service-level, rather than infrastructure, concerns. Existing airfield facilities have low levels of activity in smaller communities.
- As important freight movers, both pipelines and inland waterways provide essential service in rural areas, particularly in the case of waterways that are frequently used to transport agricultural exports. In both instances, the maintenance of the infrastructure is most often the key issue.

ENHANCING OUR COMMUNITIES AND PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT

As travel in small communities and rural areas continues to increase at an unprecedented rate, meeting the demand creates challenges. The distances and the lower population densities create difficult conditions in providing non-automobile alternatives for the growing populations that cannot or choose not to use private automobiles. Additionally, demographic trends such as the aging of the rural population present unique challenges for travel. The growing importance of tourism services, manufacturing, and freight movement in rural areas demands transportation solutions that preserve and protect the scenic, cultural, historic, and natural environment all while providing efficient transport of passengers and freight.

The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) provided more money for transportation in rural areas and small communities than ever before. But the only sure way to influence how this money is spent is by participating in the transportation planning process.

The Department of Transportation is committed to improving transportation for small communities, rural and urban areas because the benefits of are clear. . In all cases, there is widespread recognition among rural and small community residents, businesses, and community leaders that effective transportation is vital to attaining social, economic, and environmental objectives.