



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

Policy Guide on Surface Transportation

Ratified by the Board of Directors in 1990

Revised and Adopted, Chapter Delegate Assembly, San Diego, California, April 1997

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Statement of the Issue

Transportation is a major sector of the United States economy, accounting for more than ten percent of GNP.

Transportation systems affect most significant aspects of human society including:

- settlement patterns;
- land development and land use;
- economic activity;
- goods movement and trade;
- jobs and wages for thousands of workers;
- energy and resource allocation;
- access to places of work, education, health care, social life, and commerce for individuals;
- general social equity;
- environmental quality; and
- overall livability of communities and metropolitan areas.

Therefore, how and how well a transportation system functions have deep and long-term consequences for the quality of both the built and natural environments and the persons who inhabit them. Transportation represents a significant area of concern for professional planners.

Findings

A. Since the early part of the Twentieth Century, state and national policy have focused on development of a highway network that supports automobile transportation, often to the detriment of the other modes that comprise the total surface transportation system.

Discussion: Transportation systems are complex and expensive; their physical components are important parts of the social and economic infrastructure. Transportation systems are designed, constructed, maintained, and operated through a combination of public and private effort and funding. Traditionally, federal policy has defined the framework for a) how public transportation investment decisions are made; b) which projects get constructed; and c), through regulation, how both private and public sectors operate. Transport is achieved through a variety of complementary modes including automobiles, bus transit, bicycles, feet, airplanes, trucks, rail, and boats.

B. In 1991 Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). This legislation sunsets on September 30, 1997. In the debates on reauthorization, many issues directly affecting planners and planning will be discussed and decided, so it is critical that APA be actively involved.

Discussion: ISTEA is widely recognized as pivotal legislation. It made key policy changes that not only strengthened the role of comprehensive planning in the transportation decision-making process but also set a new direction for federally supported transportation activities in the United States. ISTEA declared the Interstate highway system complete; shifted attention from new facility construction towards efficient management, operation, and maintenance of the existing system; and focused resources and processes on creation of a "seamless" intermodal transportation system. ISTEA also initiated a variety of procedural and funding changes designed to "level the playing field" among decision-making agencies as well as among modal options. Some of the more significant policy changes supported by the general planning community are:

- Placing new emphasis on facilitating smooth intermodal connections throughout the transportation system;
- Renewing attention to the critical roles of freight movement and port access in the economic health of the nation;
- Reshaping criteria for surface transportation project selection;
- Creating new funding mechanisms and categories and enabling flexible resource allocations across modes;
- Disciplining state and metropolitan project development processes by "constraining" both plans and programs to include only those projects that could be paid for with reasonably available or projected revenues and those that moved regions towards attainment of air quality standards;
- Strengthening the linkage between transportation planning and attainment of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards;
- Requiring development of both state and metropolitan transportation plans as a platform for project selection and establishing specific "factors" that these long-range transportation plans had to address;
- Focusing attention on so-called demand-side strategies such as congestion management and congestion pricing as tools for helping solve highway system capacity problems;
- Legitimizing pedestrian and bicycle travel as serious modes of transportation rather than primarily recreation;
- Recognizing explicitly the relationship between transportation and land use;
- Expanding participation in the decision-making process beyond an established set of agencies and interest groups to include those groups that have traditionally been under represented in the decision-making process and hence been the "path of least resistance" for projects; and
- Renewing the Federal commitment to multimodal transportation research through increased funding to the National Cooperative Highway Research Program and the establishment of a parallel Transit Cooperative Research Program.

In addition, ISTEA allocated significant funds to development of intelligent transportation systems that apply computer-based information and sensing technologies to solving problems of coordination, system capacity, and safety. The act also strengthened the powers and authority of the metropolitan planning organization (MPO), emphasized more "meaningful" public involvement, called for coordination of institutional procedures (most notably those of the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration), and set the stage for a general programmatic shift towards regional planning and system management.

C. Implementation of ISTEA has been difficult. Significant opposition and backlash regarding important aspects continue and may impact the outcome of reauthorization if not overcome.

Discussion: ISTEA 1991 opened a period of major policy and power realignment. It elevated the importance of planning, generated significant new data and public involvement requirements, and almost immediately began to engage new stakeholders and major new economic partners by refocusing attention on transportation's key role as an economic generator. Implementation of the various changes called for by ISTEA and the federal regulations have been complex and for many agencies difficult and uncomfortable. Certification reviews of the critical metropolitan planning processes carried out by the FHWA and FTA suggest that "uneven" might be the single best

descriptor of how well ISTEA's planning and programming requirements have been implemented so far.

Troubling institutional and political resistance to the shifts embodied in ISTEA remain in many agencies and communities. The existence of so-called pipeline projects as well as the lack of priority given to providing resources to fund new planning processes, collect performance data and construct desired facilities while taking care of backlogged maintenance needs as well as the lag in research and education have also slowed progress towards full implementation. A 1996(?) report by the GAO on implementation of planning requirements supports the general sense within the transportation community that significant challenges remain, particularly in the areas of involving the public more extensively, constraining transportation plans and programs to realistic financial resources, and developing workable criteria and procedures for setting priorities on transportation projects. Some state departments of transportation argue that ISTEA's many new requirements are too costly and too difficult and should be reversed, while some metropolitan planning organizations contend that patience and further strengthening of their position vis a vis the states position are needed to implement institutional and technical changes.

D. The existence of high quality efficient and effective transportation has a demonstrated strong positive impact on a nation's economic productivity and well being. As we move towards the Twenty-First Century and continued globalization of economic activity, transportation is increasingly seen as a key component to maintaining the competitive advantage of the United States. ISTEA 1991 recognizes this and presumably so will its reauthorization. At the same time as the demands of commerce on the transportation system are increasing, Americans are also demanding an unequalled amount of mobility and access. Resources available for transportation are limited. It will take good planning to allocate resources fairly across many competing needs.

E. As the environment in which planners work changes, APA's policy guidelines should also change. The 1990 transportation policy was written and adopted before passage of ISTEA and certainly before the experience gained in trying to implement ISTEA. A review by the Transportation Division's ISTEA Reauthorization Task Force and the Legislative and Policy Committee of the APA Board concurred that a total revision and up-dating was needed to reflect new federal direction.

Discussion: Although the 1990 policy guide was useful as a framework for some aspects of today's discussions, it generally reflected a different set of working assumptions and goals and even used a different vocabulary. Hence it failed to address critical aspects of the post-ISTEA environment for planning and could not provide clear guidance for either APA National or State Chapters in their discussions of issues and support positions of concern to professional planners either in the debates on Reauthorization or in the years to come.

In the Spring of 1996 the Task Force developed and distributed a member questionnaire designed to identify critical issues as well as to define general approaches and concerns regarding the post-ISTEA era which would form the basis for a substantive revision of the 1990 policy guide. A Preliminary Draft Policy Guide was developed based on the results of the survey and discussions at meetings of the Transportation Division. In early 1997 APA members through the Chapters and Divisions were asked to review this draft policy guide to help craft a final set of policies to be presented to the Delegate Assembly and National Board for adoption and ratification respectively in April in San Diego.

Policy Positions

1. Comprehensive, multimodal transportation planning is the basis of investment decisions

APA subscribes to the vision of a well-integrated multimodal transportation system that serves individual, local, regional, state, national, and global needs and achieves goals of choice, mobility, access, sustainable development, and efficiency. Cooperative and comprehensive planning processes must be the basis for public and private investment decisions.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. Planners should actively promote the development of cooperative, comprehensive, and on-going transportation planning processes that are coordinated, integrated, innovative, given high priority, and have financial commitments from many levels of government and many different users.
- b. Planners should support development and implementation of requirements that strengthen links between the planning and programming processes and ensure that transportation projects are clearly designed to advance the defined long range planning goals of metropolitan regions, tribal entities, and states as well as multi-state and national interests.
- c. Planners should support legislative approaches to defining transportation planning requirements that allow flexible application of the many specific planning elements rather than approaches that simplify and generalize the definition planning requirements in order to make them fit every imaginable circumstance.
- d. In assessing the wide range of impacts of alternative transportation solutions, planners should promote use of the latest and best available information and support allocations of resources towards this end.
- e. Planners should encourage planning processes that add value in both the long and short term by putting forth alternatives and coordinating selected project developments so that specific transportation investments move towards achieving the community's vision of the future while addressing the expressed needs of current users and correcting immediate system problems.

2. Public involvement in transportation planning is necessary and desirable.

Transportation plans and projects must reflect the diversity of concerns and needs in a community, the region, and the nation, and that this is best accomplished through adoption of policies mandating active implementation of broadly inclusive and on-going Public Involvement programs.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. Public involvement processes and selected methods should be explicitly designed to actively engage all affected and interested groups, with special attention being given to those who have been traditionally under represented in transportation decision-making. The groups that should be brought into the process include but are not limited to citizens, elected officials, government agency staff, private sector providers and users, public stakeholders, community activities, professional planners, engineers, and technical experts.
- b. Public involvement processes should give the public a meaningful role in all stages of the transportation decision-making process, including development of plans, programs, and the implementation of projects.
- c. Planners should support and take an active role in developing and conducting sessions to educate citizens and local officials in rural and small communities on the importance of transportation and how they can participate in the planning and decision-making process.

3. The levels of government share responsibility for and interest in transportation decisions

Transportation plans and programs should be developed and implemented by means of processes in which the responsibility and authority for planning and decision-making are shared among local, regional, state, tribal and national units of government in manner that reflects an equitable balance of their specific as well as related interests.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. Planners should encourage and support creation of collaborative transportation decision-making processes that integrate national, state, metropolitan, tribal, and local needs and define roles and responsibilities for each of these players clearly and appropriately.

- b. Planners should support efforts to program major investments based on a cooperative and objective assessment of need, goal attainment, and system function, with meaningful public involvement in the process and without regard to jurisdiction, ownership, or funding source for the potential project.

4. Transportation decisions should produce broad public benefits

Public policies and actions must ensure that transportation system development creates public benefits for environmental quality, growth management, land use, housing affordability, social equity, historic preservation, urban design, and economic development.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. The national organization and state chapters should support efforts to maintain if not strengthen the regulatory connection between transportation planning and programming so that projects are always related to an adopted plan.
- b. APA should support strong positive links between transportation plans and efforts to meet and maintain national ambient air quality standards.
- c. Planners should strive for the integration of transportation and land-use planning
- d. Planners shall promote and support land development patterns and policies that create a positive environment for transit operations, including but not limited to transit-oriented development strategies.

5. Plans and programs should be fiscally responsible

Evaluating and constraining transportation plans and programs with realistic assessments of fiscal resources that are or will be available for project design, construction, operation, and maintenance strengthens good planning.

- a. APA shall support regulations and procedures that honor the spirit of this concept by requiring demonstration of its satisfaction using reasonable parameters.

6. Funds for transportation investments should be flexibly applied

No single funding mechanism is likely to serve all transportation interests well. Hence APA supports flexible funding programs that balance categorical with formula grants, offer broad latitude for local preferences regarding the allocation of resources across modes, and provide means to cooperatively address legitimate but sometimes conflicting regional, state, tribal, and national transportation concerns.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. Planners should promote equity in the distribution and use of public and private resources for transportation, including subsidies, incentives, set asides, user-based fees, dedicated taxes, public/private partnerships, innovative financing mechanisms, and traditional public funding.
- b. APA should support incentives and short-term set-asides to fund small scale transportation projects that will enhance overall system performance, preserve historic resources, integrate transportation facilities into community life, and promote bicycling and walking.
- c. APA should support incentives and short-term set-asides to fund transportation projects designed to enhance efficiency of freight movement while working towards mainstreaming freight concerns into the planning process.
- d. APA should support specific funding allocation for the continued operation and enhancement of the national passenger rail system, including the advancement of high speed rail modes.

7. Adequate funding is needed.

Adequate funding is the best way to ensure cross agency and multimodal cooperation in planning and delivering an effective, balanced transportation system that serves diverse needs.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. APA should support the identification, creation, and appropriation of sufficient funding needed to plan, construct, maintain, manage, operate, monitor and evaluate the performance of multimodal transportation systems, including public bus and rail transit, highways, pedestrian, bicycle, freight facilities, and marine and airport access systems.
- b. APA should support the concept that federal funding equity is best achieved through allocations to states based on objective measures of need and broad national purpose and oppose efforts to revise the funding mechanism in a way that contradicts the basic concept of federalism.
- c. APA should carefully analyze any proposals to use block grants to states for consistency with general APA policy as well as with this surface transportation policy guide, particularly when resources are smaller than demand. The block grant approach tends to reinforce the status quo and established solutions, while emerging concepts, new approaches, and equitable treatment of groups outside the mainstream tend to be neglected in the decision making process.

8. Research and data collection improve planning

Federal funding is appropriate to support research, technology development, data collection, training, technology transfer, and the integration of research results into the planning process at regional and local levels.

Specific guidelines for implementing this policy:

- a. APA should particularly support research in innovative intelligent transportation technologies, improved information processing methodologies, transportation costs and pricing mechanisms, and linkages between the transportation system and other components of regional development including land-use patterns and travel behavior.
- b. APA shall support an allocation of at least one percent of federal transportation funds for state, regional, and local planning processes.

9. Federal transportation legislation should be consistent with the above policy guidelines.

APA shall support reauthorization of ISTEA in a form consistent with the values and policies expressed in policies one through eight herein. APA and its members shall encourage the federal and state government to incorporate these policies into all subsequent transportation legislation.