

Frequently Asked Questions about TRB's Technical Activities Strategic Alignment

August 16, 2019

1. *Q: What is TRB's Technical Activities Division?*

A: The Technical Activities Division (TAD) is the unit of the Transportation Research Board that is responsible for TRB's standing technical committees. Founded in 1920 to help the country prepare for that era's "transformational technology"—the automobile—the original handful of committees identified the practical needs of the agencies responsible for roads and the research and field testing needed to fill the gaps in knowledge and technology. The committees carried out some of the research themselves and coordinated with other public and academic institutions that carried out related research. Over time the number of committees increased and the topics addressed broadened to include all modes of transportation and issues related to planning, safety, operations, environmental and social impacts, data science and application, autonomous vehicles, mobility as a service, etc.

2. *Q: How are TRB and its Technical Activities Division related to the National Academy of Sciences?*

A: The National Academy of Sciences is TRB's parent institution. It was founded in 1863 with the mission of providing scientific and technical information and advice to the country by means of convening appropriate volunteer experts. Over time, two additional academies—the National Academy of Engineering and the National Academy of Medicine—were added, so we now refer to them collectively as the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). Being part of NASEM means that TRB and TAD share the same mission of service to the country and the same commitment to balanced, independent, evidenced-based investigation and analysis.

3. *Q: How are the committees currently structured?*

A: In 2018, nearly 5,000 volunteer experts served on TRB's 212 standing committees, with several thousand additional volunteers participating as Friends of the committees. The Technical Activities Council provides volunteer leadership and coordinates the work of the committees, which are currently organized into 11 groups, as follows:

- Policy and Organization
- Planning and Environment
- Design and Construction
- Operations and Preservation
- Legal Resources
- Safety and Systems Users
- Public Transportation
- Rail
- Freight Systems
- Aviation
- Marine

Larger groups are subdivided into sections for a total of 22 sections. A full list of the current groups, sections, and committees can be found [here](#). Information about committee scopes,

chairs, and members can be found by searching in the TRB Directory at <https://www.mytrb.org/OnlineDirectory>. There are also more than 370 informal subcommittees which help the standing committees carry out their work and address the range of topics within a committee's scope.

TRB's Technical Activities Division staff oversee and support the committees; technical experts in their own right, staff are primarily responsible for ensuring that the mission of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is reflected in committee activities and that NASEM and TRB policies are adhered to.

4. Q: *What do the technical standing committees do?*

A: The standing technical committees are perhaps best known for the work they do to create TRB's iconic Annual Meeting, a gathering of more than 13,000 transportation professionals and researchers from all modes and disciplines, from the public and private sectors and universities, and from all over the country and around the world. The committees publish calls for papers, typically receiving 6,000 responses each year, which they review for presentation at the meeting. They also invite speakers to present on practical developments and emerging issues. Committee members also review papers for publication in the *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*. In addition, the committees create smaller, more focused specialty conferences—approximately 2 dozen each year—to delve more deeply into particular issues or disciplines. They produce webinars, write technical documents (such as electronic circulars), organize mentoring for young professionals, host workshops, coordinate with other transportation organizations, and generally carry out activities that advance the knowledge and practice of transportation and disseminate research results and best practices.

5. Q: *Why is TAD undergoing a review and strategic alignment of its committees?*

A: Ultimately, the reason for the strategic alignment is to ensure that we continue to excel in our mission as we enter our second century. A centenary is a milestone for any organization and one that has inspired TRB's volunteers and staff to take a fresh look at how we operate and where we can make changes that will enhance our service to the country. More specifically, the strategic alignment is aimed at:

- Ensuring that we are able to address critical and emerging transportation issues with both long-term and shorter-term horizons, by leveraging the multimodal, multidisciplinary, and multi-sectoral representation on our committees, and adjusting our processes to be more responsive to the faster pace of change in transportation today. (See TRB's Critical Issues in Transportation 2019 at <https://www.nap.edu/resource/25314/criticalissues/>.)
- Attracting broad and deep volunteer expertise, including from new disciplines and sectors, projecting a culture of openness to new people and new ideas.
- Increasing the quality of our products and services by updating systems and using best practices.
- Magnifying the impact of our work through better communication and dissemination.
- Attracting financial support from a wider array of sources by demonstrating the value and impact of TAD activities

- Creating a sustainable process for maintaining alignment with transportation research and innovation and a culture of self-evaluation and periodic “refreshing” of topics, members, and structures.
- Strengthening our culture of service to the country and to the transportation community, both practitioners and researchers.

6. Q: *Is reorganizing TRB’s committees going to be able to achieve all of TAD’s goals for its strategic alignment?*

A: Reorganizing the committees is only one component of the strategic alignment. The Technical Activities Council is also examining key committee processes, such as committee strategic planning and performance management; committee membership, including leadership and diversity; and how to make more effective use of subcommittees and joint subcommittees to quickly move into new areas and facilitate cross-committee collaboration. TAD is also re-engineering two of our strategically important products: specialty conferences and the *Transportation Research Record* journal. Using best-in-class systems, processes, and standards and specially trained staff, we are re-engineering both of these products in line with best practices—and better. We are also conducting a review of staff structure and skills and internal processes to create a more efficient operation in which staff knowledge and skills are deployed in the most effective ways possible.

7. Q: *What will the new structure look like?*

A: The new structure continues to have 11 groups, though they are somewhat different from the current 11 groups. Larger groups will be divided into sections for a total of 17 sections. We expect there to be approximately 175 committees across all groups. The 11 groups in the new structure are:

- Policy and Organization
- Planning, Methods, and Data
- Transportation Sustainability and Resilience
- Highway Infrastructure
- Safety and Operations
- Transportation Users
- Public Transportation
- Rail
- Freight Systems
- Aviation
- Marine

The [new group and section structure can be viewed here](#), with lists of the topics to be covered in each group or section. These topics will form the basis for the committees.

8. Q: *Will the new structure then be set for several decades?*

A: We hope not. One of the goals of the strategic alignment is to create a culture in which change can happen more easily and to establish processes to support more agile change. We don’t pretend that the new structure is “perfect”—no structure ever will be. So over the next year or two we will be gathering input on how the new structure is functioning and may make small

adjustments. Over the next one to three years, we will review all the committee scopes, activities, and memberships, refine the committee strategic planning process, and develop ongoing procedures for assessing and adjusting the committee structure so that we can keep TAD committees fresh without having to resort to another TAD-wide restructuring for a long time.

9. Q: *How did you decide that a committee restructuring was needed and how have you gone about deciding what the new structure should look like?*

A: The decision to review our standing committee structure is the result of approximately two years of TAC discussions about how to prepare for TRB's centennial, quickly address new and emerging areas in an environment of rapid change and constrained resources, and ensure the high quality of the committees' work. Several efforts emerged from these discussions including improvements to the TRR, specialty conference management, triennial strategic plans, etc., all of which comprise TAD's "strategic alignment." The idea of restructuring the committees gradually emerged from these efforts as it became apparent that the organic growth of the committee structure had made it somewhat difficult for newcomers to understand and has become increasingly challenging to manage. Much good work is being done but it isn't always easy to find; nor is it easy to know if we were addressing all the issues we needed to be addressing, to communicate the work being done and its value, or to ascertain the impact of the committees' efforts on transportation. The image TAC has used to describe the situation is that of a healthy, mature tree that has grown to the point of being overgrown. The tree needs careful pruning in order to continue to be healthy. "Pruning" could mean that mature committees that have largely addressed their scope may be redirected, merged with other committees, or sunsetted. Younger committees that may have arisen in response to very specific needs may need to broaden their scope or may no longer be needed. In some cases new committees need to be "grafted" into the "tree".

Determining exactly what changes to make required extensive input and consultation. The major steps in this process included:

- 2016: TAC working groups began to develop ideas for improvements.
- 2017: Committees identified critical transportation issues that should be addressed through research and innovation.
- 2018: The 11 Group Executive Boards (volunteer leadership bodies representing the sections or committees in each of the 11 groups) suggested priorities among the many issues the committees identified.
- December 2018: Staff were surveyed on overlaps or gaps in committee scopes; each staff person is responsible for a large number of related committees, making them well-suited for this task.
- January 2019: TAC decision to go forward with a committee restructuring, initial discussions with the members of the leadership boards of the current 11 groups.
- March-April 2019: All chairs of groups, sections, and committees were invited to provide their ideas regarding overall structural changes and specific committee-related changes.
- May 2019: The results of the all-chair input were compiled and provided to the group and section chairs who met in a two-day workshop to hammer out recommendations for TAC.

- June 2019: TAC met for 2 days to go over the results of the workshop, which were distilled into “scenarios” representing moderate to more significant structural changes. In plenary and break-out sessions TAC went through the scenarios in detail, decided upon a new group and section structure, and outlined the topics that should be addressed by committees in the new groups and sections including identification of committees to be merged, sunsetted, or created. The group and section structure was shared with TRB’s Executive Committee, which expressed its support for the restructuring effort.

10. Q: *What is the process for finalizing the structure?*

A: During August and September 2019, group chairs will meet with section and/or committee chairs to go over the detailed committee- and section-level changes and identify the issues that need to be addressed to make implementation of the new structure as smooth as possible. At the same time TRB sponsors will be briefed on the new structure. Information (such as these FAQs) will be posted on the “Strategic Alignment” website, which also includes a [brief survey](#) for volunteers and sponsors to provide feedback. The survey will be open through September 15, 2019.

11. Q: *How will this new structure address the goals of the strategic alignment?*

A: Here are a few examples of how specific parts of the new structure supports strategic alignment goals, such as promoting innovation and making better use of our multi-modal and multi-disciplinary expertise base:

- The Policy and Organization Group has been modified to more explicitly address issues at an executive management level, where connections among policy, technology, data, and people must be address if innovation is to be successful and have the positive impacts people hope for. Moving Legal Resources to this executive level reflect the importance of issues such as intellectual property, privacy, civil rights and tort liability in the current environment of rapid change in transportation.
- In some cases committees are being restructured to have broader scopes or scopes less restricted by current institutional and legal requirements. This is true for committees in the areas of planning and environment that are largely structured around current federal requirements in these areas. A committee currently focused on federal requirements for disadvantaged business enterprises, will expand its scope to look at innovative approaches to equity in transportation contracting that go beyond the requirements of federal law.
- The Highway Infrastructure Group will combine maintenance and preservation committees with design and construction committees to promote a more integrated, life-cycle approach to highway infrastructure needs. Committees within this group will be revised to concentrate multiple narrow subdisciplines into somewhat broader scopes to promote interaction among related topics and to widen perspectives on potential sources of innovation.
- A new Transportation Sustainability and Resilience (TSR) Group represents a departure from our traditional approach to organizing committees. In the current structure, groups are focused either on a related set of disciplines or on a particular transportation mode. TSR is designed to be a multimodal, multidisciplinary group focused on addressing two

large, complex, and interrelated challenges facing transportation. TSR will need to take an outcome- or objective-oriented approach rather than a modal or disciplinary approach. It will only be successful if it reaches out to committees in other groups and promotes integration of sustainability and resilience throughout transportation. As such this new and “experimental” group will have the opportunity to model effective approaches to cross-group collaboration leading to more effective transportation solutions. The ultimate success of TSR would be to make itself obsolete, having mainstreamed sustainable and resilient approaches. But then there would certainly be another large, complex problem to build a new group around.

In addition to these specific structural benefits, the very process of reviewing each component of the current structure allowed us to identify issues that were missing from the committee structure, but which have particular importance at this time, such as the relationship between transportation and public health, growing concern for equity in provision of innovative transportation services, workforce issues, and new materials and techniques, such as “3D printing,” which could play a major role in addressing the needs of aging transportation infrastructure.

Of course, the structure alone is not enough. Improved processes, better training for committee chairs, and improved communications approaches, among other things, are also necessary to achieve the strategic alignment goals. This will be an ongoing effort.

12. Q: What were the criteria for making committee changes?

A: TAD committees exist to identify transportation critical issues and investigate and communicate evidence-based approaches to address these issues—they should be focused on transportation research and innovation from generation and dissemination of new knowledge to facilitating implementation of solutions. Starting from this principle, we are looking to retain and create committees that are focused on critical and emerging issues in transportation, issues that will benefit from research and innovation and from TRB’s ability to bring together experts from different disciplines, all modes, and the public, private, and academic sectors. All committees should reflect sectoral diversity, many should be multi-modal, and some should involve multiple disciplines within the committee itself (all committees can partner with other committees to increase the inter-disciplinary input to their work). This means our committees do not mirror the structures of other transportation organizations, which typically cater to a narrower set of modes, disciplines, or sectors. On the contrary, innovation often requires cutting across traditional silos. We wish to complement the work of other organizations rather than duplicate it. The focus of our committees also means that they should not spend much time dealing with the day-to-day work of transportation professionals except in as much as research and innovation can advance that work; in other words, our committees are not professional society committees or communities of practice. They are always oriented toward research and innovation, toward addressing the issues and challenges that go beyond daily activities and may even promise (or threaten) to fundamentally change these activities.

13. Q: When will the committee changes take place?

A: We expect to announce the new structure, including specific committees, in October 2019. Changes will be implemented after the January 2020 TRB Annual Meeting. There will be no impact on the 2020 TRB Annual Meeting. The details of implementation may differ across groups but the new structure will be in place by late spring 2020. This will enable the newly-structured committees to plan for and meet at the 2021 TRB Annual Meeting—TRB’s 100th annual meeting.

14. Q: *There must be a lot to work out for this restructuring? What will it require?*

A: Restructuring TAD committees is certainly a lot more than moving boxes on an organization chart! Over the coming months we will need to review committee scopes, leadership, and membership to ensure that we cover the most important issues with the necessary breadth and depth of expertise, while maintaining a healthy representation of young “up and coming” experts. We will need to retool several databases and enterprise IT systems to reflect the new structure, naming, and coding of committees. The Annual Meeting schedule and space assignments are developed around the committee structure, so we will need to make changes there as well in preparation for the 2021 Annual Meeting. The staffing structure also needs to be adjusted to the new committee structure.

Addition FAQs for current committee members and chairs

15. Q: *How will the changes affect the 2020 Annual Meeting and other activities that current committees are in the midst of planning?*

A: The 2020 Annual Meeting will be organized by and around the current committee structure. All current committees, sections, and groups will have their normal meetings and the normal allotment of sessions to plan. If a committee that is intended to undergo some change is in the midst of planning a conference or some other major activity, we will work out a specific implementation plan with that committee to ensure that the activity is not adversely impacted.

16. Q: *If a committee is being sunsetted or merged with another committee, what will happen with the chairs and members of those committees?*

A: Each case will be handled individually, but some possible approaches include: allowing the chairs of merged committees to co-chair the merged committee until one or both of their terms end; allowing members of merged committees to remain on the merged committee even if that means the merged committee temporarily exceeds the maximum committee size—a schedule would be worked out for getting the committee down to the maximum size over the next year or two; chairs of sections that are merged could co-chair the merged section until one or both of their terms end; chairs of sunsetted sections could serve as an at-large member of a relevant section or group executive board until their current term ends. These decisions will be worked out with group chairs and staff.

To the extent possible, the normal rotation process and schedule will be used to implement change in membership of committees, although not necessarily on the rotation schedule of a given committee. In other words, some merged committees will undergo some rotation in years

other than the normal rotation year of the committee. This is inevitable when committees with different rotation years are merged; it will also be necessary to trim over-large committees back to the maximum committee size in a reasonable amount of time. In addition, once all the changes are done we may need to adjust some rotation years so that we still have approximately one-third of the committees rotating each year.

Whatever the disposition of a given committee, TRB will always welcome the involvement of former committee members as friends of one or more of the committees in the revised structure.

17. Q: *How will decisions be made about chairs and members of new committees?*

A: Appointments for new committees will be made the same way that all appointments are made: TRB will appoint chairs with input from volunteer leaders in the relevant section and/or group. Staff will work with the chair to identify members, which will also be appointed by TRB. It is expected that new committees may require some active recruiting of new members to bring in expertise we do not currently have in our volunteer base.

18. Q: *What will happen with the current task forces?*

A: There are a handful of task forces in the current structure. Some of these function more like quasi-committees than like true task forces focused on a narrow topic for a fixed period of time. "Task forces" of this sort will be disbanded and integrated into committees or subcommittees. Group chairs will communicate with individual task force chairs about the disposition of each task force.

19. Q: *What will happen with subcommittees?*

A: Unlike task forces, the 370+ subcommittees are "unofficial" volunteer groups and do not show up in the official committee structure or on TRB's website. As such they were not directly addressed in the restructuring. Several groups and sections have already been reviewing their subcommittees to determine if they are all still necessary and there has been some culling of subcommittees in these cases. Many subcommittees are carrying out very important work addressing particularly timely issues. We plan to develop ways to make the work of these subcommittees more visible and to continue using them to support cross-modal and interdisciplinary work and rapidly expand into new areas. Expect more development in this area over the next year or so.

20. Q: *Do the final scopes, chairs, and membership of new or merged committees have to be finalized by the end of September?*

A: The scopes, chairs, and membership of new or merged committees do not need to be finalized by the end of September, but the title and basic outline of the focus of the committees does need to be settled by the end of September. We will work with chairs on refining the scopes and figuring out chairs and members in the October to December time frame.

21. Q: *Will it be allowable to have more than three active Emeritus members on a merged committee?*

A: All of the active Emeritus members on committees that get merged together are permitted to remain active Emeritus members on the resulting merged committee even if the total number of active Emeritus members on the merged committee exceeds three. The merged committee will return to the maximum of three active Emeritus members as its Emeritus members no longer continuing to be active.

22. Q: *What other changes can we expect to see and when? Should we hold off on any planned activities until we hear more?*

A: As stated earlier, TAD's strategic alignment is about more than moving committees around an organization chart. Over the next one to three years, you should expect to see more information about the following matters: a revised format for committee strategic plans; guidelines for ongoing committee self-assessment and TAD-wide committee "health checks"; greater visibility for the work of subcommittees and guidelines for using subcommittees and joint subcommittees to explore new areas and facilitate cross cutting efforts; stronger role for section chairs in TAD-wide leadership and coordination; and possibly new staffing structures.

As far as planned activities, as always it is best to check with your staff representative. We anticipate a hiatus in some activities during 2020 in order to free up time to implement changes. At this writing, we know we will not be going through the Blue Ribbon Committee nomination process or the Emeritus member process in 2020. It is inevitable that Triennial Strategic Plans will be affected. When the complete structure is announced in October, committees planning to complete a TSP in 2020 will know if they need to do so or not. Some committees will decide that they need to work on a TSP in 2020 even if they had not planned to because they need to revise their scope and activities. It is possible that some other small processes will be put on hold in 2020 but none have been identified yet. The Annual Meeting, TRR journal, and specialty conferences need to proceed as planned. Any impacts on committee rotation in 2020 will be worked out in detail with relevant committee chairs.

23. Q: *If the committee structure has already been determined, what is my role as a committee member?*

A: While the revised committee structure is close to finished, there are at least two ways in which you can contribute. First, we are looking for your feedback on the topics shown under the groups and sections in the revised structure; using the online [survey](#), you can provide your thoughts on priorities and identify any missing topics you believe are essential. Second, be thoughtfully vocal about how the new committee structure is working, including how well it is identifying new transportation issues and whether the new structure is pushing older but still important issues and topics to the side. Help committee, section, and group leadership make the most of the new alignment of committees and topics.

24. Q: *If a committee becomes a subcommittee in the new structure, will it be able to sponsor a session at the Annual Meeting? Will the subcommittee chair have his/her travel paid for as the standing committee chairs do?*

A: A reduction in the number of committees will make some Annual Meeting session slots available. TRB and the Technical Activities Council have not yet decided how to allocate these

“extra” sessions, but it is possible that some subcommittees will be able to use them. There will not be enough extra sessions for every subcommittee to have its own session, so TAC will need to develop a process for allocating them. Unfortunately, it will not be possible to pay for the travel of subcommittee chairs. There are more than 370 subcommittees already so this would be prohibitively expensive.

25. Q: *My principal concerns and research topics are now split among two or more new or reconfigured committees-- I'm torn!*

A: Given the number and range of topics addressed by the committees, and the complexity of many transportation issues, any structure is going to result in some topics being handled by more than one committee. Committees are particularly effective when they make strategic links among themselves. If your principal issues are split across committee, try to use this as an opportunity to create natural links between these committees, and re-examine your own interests in light of the changed or broadened scope that's implied by these multiple committees. There may be new research opportunities that had been hidden before or an opportunity to engage a joint subcommittee.

26. Q: *My principal concerns and research topics seem to have disappeared or been de-emphasized? Is there a place for me in TRB?*

A: Talk with the chairs of the remaining or merged committees that seem the most closely related to your interests. Many committees that will appear not to have changed will have been asked to modify their scopes to accommodate issues that were lost in the structural changes. Or there may be a plan to preserve a topic in a subcommittee. Or you may find that the topic was inadvertently omitted and we need to find a place for it. If none of these are the case, this may be an opportunity for you to explore some new area, perhaps something outside of but related to your interests which could spur innovative approaches within your own area.