

Navigating Your First TRB Annual Meeting

NICOLAS NORBOGE

For most transportation professionals, the Transportation Research Board (TRB) Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., is a major event. For past attendees, navigating the Annual Meeting can seem like second nature. Experienced attendees know the best lectern sessions and networking receptions to attend as well as the most engaging poster sessions and the most interesting committee meetings. They know which airport to fly into; how to navigate the Washington, D.C., Metro system; and which hotel offers the best Wi-Fi.

For some attendees, the 2015 Annual Meeting—Sunday, January 11, through Thursday, January 15—will be their first.

Fortunately for them, everyone will be in the same circumstance at the upcoming meeting: to accommodate the growing attendance, TRB has moved the 2015 Annual Meeting from the trio of hotels near the Dupont Circle neighborhood to the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. The 2.3-million-square-foot Convention Center and the adjacent Marriott Marquis Hotel and its five levels of meeting space are better equipped to handle an Annual Meeting of more than 11,900 and provide a central location for sessions and meetings. Experienced Annual Meeting attendees now will have to gain acquaintance with a different convention facility in a new section of the city.

When I attended my first TRB Annual Meeting in 2012, I was overwhelmed by the number of people who seemed to know what they were doing. I felt alone in my need for help. This year, everyone else will be learning how to navigate the meeting.

Navigation Tips

As you start your inaugural TRB Annual Meeting journey, a few pointers may help. First, see if you can link up with someone you



Attendees can get the most out of the TRB Annual Meeting by planning ahead for daily activities.

know who has been to the Annual Meeting before. This could be your professor, a mentor, or even a colleague at your organization. Having someone there to provide insight on the right lectern and poster sessions to attend will save considerable time and possible frustration.

Second, keep in mind that the contacts you make at the meeting can be as important to you as what you will learn in the sessions. Getting to know people in the profession will provide significant benefits throughout your career, therefore take advantage of networking opportunities—including attending TRB committee meetings—and volunteer to participate in committee activities. Take

time to enjoy meeting people and to brush up on your networking skills. A good general rule is to spend twice as much time listening as speaking. Follow up with key contacts as soon as you can.

Planning Ahead

Although some attendees plan their schedule when they arrive at the conference, it is easier to plan which sessions and meetings you want to attend before leaving for Washington. Take advantage of the helpful conference planning tools on the TRB website and download the TRB Annual Meeting app before you arrive—and keep time in your schedule open, since you never know what new opportunities may arise.

If you are presenting a paper in a lectern or poster session, remember these three rules: *practice, practice, practice*. Take time to practice your presentation several times. This will help ensure that you are sufficiently prepared. TRB attracts the best of the best in the transportation industry—do not be surprised if someone asks specific, in-depth questions about your research. Anticipate and prepare for those questions before your presentation.

Learn and Network

Finally, enjoy the ride. Some attendees have claimed that the Annual Meeting is nothing but work, but most find it a genuinely fulfilling experience and an opportunity to learn new things and to meet people in the transportation industry.

The TRB Annual Meeting is a unique learning and networking experience and can be great fun. With the conference in a new location this year, new attendees will be on a relatively even level with those who are more experienced. Plan, prepare, and bring business cards—you will need them!



The Welcome Session, held on the Sunday afternoon of the Annual Meeting, provides a broad orientation to sessions, workshops, meetings, and other events.

The author is Assistant Research Scientist, Infrastructure Investment Analysis, Texas A&M Transportation Institute, Houston.