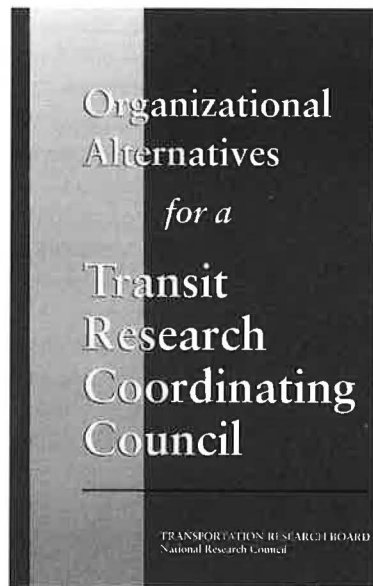


Organizational Alternatives for a Transit Research Coordinating Council



Organizational Alternatives for a Transit Research Coordinating Council (price: \$12.00; \$9.00 for TRB affiliates) is available from the Transportation Research Board, Box 289, Washington, D.C. 20055 (telephone 202-334-3213 or 3214).

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) recognized public transit as an important way to reduce congestion and improve air quality in the nation's cities. The act significantly expanded the scale and scope of federally sponsored transit planning as well as research and development (R&D) activities to encourage sound investments in public transit.

Anticipating program changes, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requested that the Transportation Research Board of the National Research Council examine the need for a new organizational structure to manage larger and more diverse transit program activities, with particular emphasis on R&D programs. Under the leadership of Gorman Gilbert, Director of the Institute for Transportation Research and Education at the University of North Carolina, 11 experts conducted a year-long study to address this need. These experts were transit administrators, research program managers, researchers, and users drawn from transit operating agencies, state transit departments, metropolitan planning organizations, universities and consulting firms, the transit supply industry, and international associations. The results of the recently released report, *Organizational Alternatives for a Transit Research Coordinating Council*, are presented here.

Overview of New Transit Research Program Structure

ISTEA provides new funding for transit research and a major restructuring and expansion of program activities. Under the legislation, funding for transit planning and research is combined and drawn from a 3 percent set-aside of the total FTA budget. Transit planning and research program funds are then allocated among five broad program categories and a National Transit Institute for training according to target percentage set-asides.

The new set-aside arrangement provides a more predictable and stable source of funding for planning and research than in the past. Although the overall size of the federal transit program cannot be predetermined, a fixed set-aside should ensure that research (and planning) receives a fair share of whatever funding is available and that the vulnerability of research budgets as line-item targets is reduced.

Under ISTEA, the amount of resources available for research is also expanded, providing a more adequate level of support for R&D activities for the \$15 billion transit industry. In fiscal year 1991 before ISTEA was passed, for example, funding for transit research totaled between \$13 million and \$15 million. By fiscal year 1994, funding for research could total more than \$70 million, approximately a fivefold increase over 1991 levels. Even if all of the authorized funds are not appropriated, the scale of funding is a substantial increase over that in past years.

Although FTA continues to be the primary funder of transit research, under ISTEA research programs are no longer concentrated in FTA. New programs broaden the focus of research from providing mission support for FTA to meeting the research needs of such other constituencies as state DOTs (the State

Planning and Research Program), transit operators (the Transit Cooperative Research Program), and the transit supply industry (the Technology Development Program of the FTA National Program). Coordinating the research needs and programs of this diverse community of states, some 1,600 transit service providers, and private industry is likely to prove challenging.

Need for Coordination

The need to coordinate transit R&D programs is more critical than ever because of the changes introduced by ISTEA: the increased scale of funding for R&D activities, the greater number of research programs, and the diversity of organizations involved in re-

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search. There is some coordination now, but it is primarily at the program and project levels. For example, technical personnel meet and exchange information informally at conferences, workshops, and committees sponsored by such organizations as TRB and the American Public Transit Association (APTA).

Continuing this approach is risky, especially as the overall research program grows in scale and scope. These risks include unnecessary costs and waste of research funds, and duplication of research (or the converse—gaps in the collective research effort). In addition, a loosely coordinated research program may give the impression of poor management and lack of accountability by research sponsors to oversight groups, such as congressional authorizing committees. Finally, coordination without a means for systematic input by research users risks producing research that is irrelevant to user needs.

The greatest need is for a policy-level coordinating mechanism—a Transit Research Coordinating Council (TRCC)—to monitor the

complex research environment and provide guidance to program sponsors and managers on appropriate directions and priorities for the national transit research effort.

Requirements for Successful Coordination

For a coordinating group to be successful, the major stakeholders in the transit community must be involved in a structure sufficiently independent of program sponsors and individual constituents to render credible advice. Also required are a knowledgeable membership that is able to identify emerging issues and advise on broad research program goals and directions, continuity to maintain a monitoring capability and provide timely advice, and staff and budget to support these activities.

More specifically, TRCC should comprise the leadership of the full spectrum of transit research programs, program sponsors, and potential users of research. Its role should be proactive as well as reactive, and it should include the following functions:

- Monitor programs and exchange information;
- Assess the balance and effectiveness of existing research programs;
- Advise on the direction, priorities, and level of funding of future research activities; and
- Evaluate the adequacy of research dissemination efforts.

Institutional Structure for TRCC

The study explored several options for locating TRCC, including basing it in the University Transportation Centers Program, APTA, the Transit Development Corporation, FTA, professional societies, a federal advisory committee, or the National Research Council.

The most promising institutional arrangements were narrowed to two: (a) a federal advisory committee—either as part of the Surface Transportation Research Advisory Committee or as a new federal advisory committee focused only on transit—and (b) a new National Research Council committee modeled

on a Research Council policy advisory committee established to oversee an expanded highway research program.

Advantages of the former arrangement are low cost (an advisory committee would draw on existing U.S. Department of Transportation staff and support services) and the possibility of building on an existing structure. The major potential disadvantage is lack of independence: as a federal advisory committee, TRCC might not have the latitude to carry out its proactive evaluative functions and initiate the kinds of analyses it deems necessary to operate as an objective and credible voice for program oversight groups as well as FTA on the direction of transit research activities.

The latter arrangement—operation as a Research Council committee—would address several of the disadvantages just raised, but it would also have costs. The National Research Council would provide a more independent environment than a federal advisory committee would. Moreover, the committee could draw directly on the experience of the Research and Technology Coordinating Committee, a Research Council committee formed to undertake many of the same functions as TRCC but in the area of highway research. The primary disadvantages are the costs of convening and supporting a new group at the National Research Council.

Next Steps

The committee urged that FTA move quickly to establish TRCC. It recognized that not all of the activities envisioned for TRCC can be achieved simultaneously. In the short run, strong support and funding by FTA are essential to ensure that TRCC is established and has adequate resources to support and sustain its mission. Building linkages and establishing relationships among the major stakeholders in the transit community so that TRCC can furnish meaningful and credible advice on the goals and directions of research programs will take more time. The key point is that the commitment be made now, so that as the new transit research structure authorized by ISTEA evolves, a strong coordinating mechanism will be in place to make sure that new research funds are well targeted and productively used.

Recommendations for Establishing TRCC

- TRCC should be established as a policy oversight group to coordinate and oversee the entire range of transit research programs.
- TRCC should be structured along the following lines:
 - The committee should have between 15 and 20 members, incorporating the full spectrum of research interests.
 - Open communication should be ensured through consultation and representation of the views of all affected groups.
 - Members should be appointed through solicitation of recommendations from the major actors and affected parties.
 - Staff of 1–2 persons required.
 - TRCC should operate proactively as well as reactively.
- Annual reports and interim reports should be issued as needed. TRCC should also develop a compendium of research projects as one of its primary products.
- TRCC could be organized as a federal advisory committee or a committee of the National Research Council.

Proposed Membership of TRCC

- Leaders involved in research from such organizations as state departments of transportation, the governing board of the Transit Cooperative Research Program, the University Transportation Centers Program, the Transportation Research Board, IVHS America, and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.
 - Transit operators, including large and small transit authorities, and private operators, such as the private bus industry.
 - Individual researchers.
 - Suppliers.
 - Users, such as metropolitan planning organizations.
 - Industry associations, such as the American Public Transit Association and the Community Transportation Association of America.

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