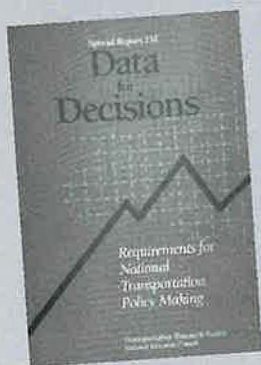


Investing in Transportation Information

Bureau of Transportation Statistics

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Special Report 234, *Data for Decisions: Requirements for National Policy Making*, is available from the Transportation Research Board (see Publications Order Form in this issue).

234). BTS responded to the ISTEA mandate and the TRB recommendations by launching major surveys of passenger travel and freight movement, publishing a series of comprehensive annual reports on the state of transportation, initiating efforts to improve data quality and comparability, and establishing new channels for the distribution of reports and data. Funding for these efforts grew from \$5 million in the agency's first year to \$25 million in the last year of ISTEA.

As ISTEA expired, members of the data community wondered whether Congress would treat BTS as a one-time endeavor or a long-term effort to improve information for transportation decisions. Fortunately, Congress recognized the benefits of the services provided by BTS. The Bureau's broad mandate was reaffirmed, its budget was increased to \$31 million per year, and a number of topics and functions were added for BTS to pursue in the years ahead.

New topics include variables affecting global competitiveness, the relationships between highway transportation and international trade, information on bicycle and pedestrian travel, and an accounting of expenditures and capital stocks related to transportation infrastructure. TEA-21 also codifies the Bureau's National Transportation Atlas Data Base and Intermodal Transportation Data Base.

The National Transportation Atlas Data Base combines geographic data on the location, connectivity, and surroundings of transportation facilities and services. Data covering all modes are published annually, and have been extended to include Canada and Mexico.

The Intermodal Transportation Data Base is being built on two major surveys conducted by BTS: the Commodity Flow Survey and

In a speech supporting a strong federal role in transportation, Abraham Lincoln said, "Statistics shall save us from doing what we do in the wrong places." The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century reaffirms the federal financial role in transportation, and reflects Lincoln's wisdom by continuing national programs that provide key information for effective investment of federal transportation funds.

TEA-21 was a critical test for the information programs established under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. Among ISTEA's accomplishments was the creation of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, following closely the recommendations of the Transportation Research Board report *Data for Decisions: Requirements for National Policy Making* (Special Report

the American Travel Survey. TEA-21 ensures that BTS will continue to update these surveys. BTS is also exploring with the Federal Highway Administration ways to join the American Travel Survey (which measures long-distance travel) and the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (which emphasizes local travel).

TEA-21 makes explicit the need for BTS programs to be relevant to transportation decision making by federal, state, and local governments, as well as by transportation-related associations, private businesses, and consumers. This mandate goes well beyond those typical for national statistical agencies, which are focused primarily on needs of the federal government. The broader mandate for BTS recognizes that most transportation decisions are made outside the federal government, and that BTS must serve the entire transportation community if its information is to make an effective difference. This mandate is also consistent with discussions in the National Conference on Information Needs To Support State and Local Transportation Decision Making into the 21st Century, cosponsored by TRB, BTS, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, FHWA, and the Federal Transit Administration (documented in TRB Conference Proceedings 14).

In addition, TEA-21 strengthens the Bureau's role in the federal government. BTS now has a mandate to "review and report to the Secretary of Transportation on the sources and reliability of the statistics proposed by the heads of the operating administrations of the Department to measure outputs and outcomes as required by the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993." This mandate reflects the recommendations of the National Research Council's Committee on National Statistics and TRB in the report *The Bureau of Transportation Statistics: Priorities for the Future*.

Perhaps of greatest interest to the TRB community, TEA-21 establishes the National Transportation Library (NTL) under the BTS director to organize and share the knowledge base of the transportation profession. As a national library, the NTL will strive to network existing collections and make the information available more easily to the transportation community. BTS is working with TRB on means of implementing this congressional mandate and of reversing the decline of transportation libraries at all levels of government and within academia. (The NTL is discussed in detail in *TR News* 195, March-April 1997.)

TEA-21 provides BTS with an ambitious set of challenges. The Bureau knows that it will turn the TEA-21 mandates into useful information for the transportation community only by working with the entire community, and by seeking the guidance and support of its customers.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this article is also appearing in *Public Roads*, a publication of the Federal Highway Administration.