

# Some Goals Achieved— New Challenges To Meet

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The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century is important legislation for many reasons. First, it provides essential federal support for America's transportation system. Large overall increases in transportation funding are included—enough so that now as never before, these increased federal funds, combined with matching dollars from states and localities, can nearly satisfy the minimum needs of the nation's transit and federal-aid highway systems. And these funding increases are achieved with no new federal taxes: for the first time in decades, all the revenue collected from highway users will actually be used for transportation purposes, instead of being diverted in part to other federal purposes.

TEA-21 builds upon the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 that it replaces. The new legislation includes a mechanism intended to ensure that Highway Trust Fund revenues are in fact expended each year, guarantees a minimum allocation of funding to all states, increases program flexibility, and meets many of the policy recommendations made by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. TEA-21's host of provisions will take months, if not years, for full implementation. Following is a review of one important aspect of TEA-21—its impact on transportation research, and how that impact compares with AASHTO's research recommendations.

## AASHTO's Research Recommendations

As part of their many reauthorization policy recommendations to Congress, the state departments of transportation and AASHTO called for a strong transportation research program. AASHTO's basic position was that research plays an essential role in achieving efficiency and safety for the nation's

transportation systems, and must be supported and guided by the federal government as a fundamental part of its responsibility to serve the national interest. AASHTO told Congress that "a well-funded, efficiently administered, federal transportation research program is essential to the successful future of our nation," and that "federal leadership and funds are essential ingredients in developing efficient, effective technical solutions to the challenges of overburdened and aging transportation systems." Among the specific recommendations made in AASHTO's reauthorization research policy report *Innovation for Transportation* (1) are the following:

◆ *The State Planning and Research (SPR) program should be maintained, including the current minimum 25 percent designated for research, along with continuing support for AASHTO's National Cooperative Highway Research Program, which is managed by the Transportation Research Board.*

TEA-21 continues the SPR program, and indeed provides a major funding increase in the 50 percent range that will benefit both highway research generally and NCHRP.

◆ *The Federal Highway Administration's Research and Technology Program should continue in order to meet the need for basic, long-range research that is neither feasible nor practical for state or local transportation agencies to conduct.*

As a result of earmarking and other reductions in funds that FHWA can utilize directly, TEA-21 sharply curtails this program. New approaches to funding basic, long-range research will need to be developed. Such approaches could involve seeking pooled SPR funds from state DOTs and funding from the private sector.

◆ *There should be a focus on deployment and technology transfer for intelligent transportation systems technologies.*

TEA-21 includes an ITS program, although the program is funded at a level below what was desired.

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◆ *University research programs in the transportation field should be supported to build fundamental knowledge for future transportation systems, and to attract and train the best and brightest students as future transportation leaders.*

TEA-21 not only retains the university research centers, but roughly doubles the number of centers that are to receive funds. The federal funds used for this expansion effectively reduce the discretionary research dollars available to FHWA, and will need to be matched, in at least some instances, by state DOTs.

◆ *The Transit Cooperative Research Program—“the first national research program in which the transit community has had a direct role in addressing the myriad of operating challenges common to the transit industry”—should be continued.*

TEA-21 continues this program.

◆ *Implementation of the Strategic Highway Research Program products and continuation of the 20-year Long-Term Pavement Performance (LTPP) Program should be supported to ensure the maximum return on the investments made.*

TEA-21 terminates most of the funding for SHRP implementation, requiring FHWA and state DOTs either to end implementation or to find other funding mechanisms, possibly with a combination of NCHRP and pooled SPR funds if the state DOTs should so decide. The LTPP Program is partially funded, and the state DOTs will again need to consider using NCHRP or SPR pooled funds to replace the FHWA dollars.

◆ *Technology transfer programs should be continued, including the international programs for technology scanning, the Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP), and the National Highway Institute (NHI).*

TEA-21 continues these programs, but at reduced funding levels overall. The LTAP Centers will now need to either curtail their programs or find replacement funds, possibly from the state DOTs. NHI funding was cut by about one-third, and the program must now be changed accordingly.

◆ *The program concepts and general funding levels established by ISTEA should be continued, but without the designation of funds for specific technologies, locations, or projects in future legislation.*

For the highway research program, TEA-21 moves in the opposite direction. Taking into account the new 90 percent obligation limitation imposed on authorized research funding levels and elimination of the dollars formerly available from funds drawn from the highway program for FHWA administrative purposes, highway research funding is actually reduced as compared with ISTEA. The former FHWA administrative fund amounted to 3.75 percent of the highway program, and a substantial portion of this amount was used to supplement research program funding and to undertake new initiatives. Under TEA-21 this administrative fund is limited to 1.5 percent of the highway program, and none of these dollars can be used for research. In addition, many of the research program dollars in TEA-21 are earmarked for specific research projects and universities, further reducing FHWA's traditional central role in guiding highway research.

## Summary

In enacting TEA-21, Congress has continued some aspects of the transportation research program resulting from ISTEA. But Congress has also clearly indicated that it wants a new kind of highway research program. The new research program is smaller (even though the highway program itself increases by more than 40 percent); the traditional central role of FHWA is reduced; and the role of the state DOTs, universities, and others specifically designated by Congress is increased.

For everyone involved in highway research, the challenges presented by TEA-21 are the new reality. These challenges will require much thought, planning, and action if the highway research program resulting from TEA-21 is to be productive and meaningful. FHWA and AASHTO have pledged themselves to meet these new challenges, but doing so will take time and require new relationships and partnerships.

## Reference

1. *Innovation for Transportation*. AASHTO, Washington, D.C., 1996.