
TEA-21 AND TRANSIT

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There has been a great deal of celebrating in the transit community over the passage of TEA-21. Why? Simply put, TEA-21 preserves the best aspects of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, improves on other parts of ISTEA, and greatly expands funding for transit.

Although ISTEA authorized \$31 billion for transit over 6 years, those funding levels were subjected to the annual appropriations process in a time of budgetary constraints. As a result, despite the best efforts of Appropriations Committee leaders, the 6-year funding for transit under ISTEA was just above \$24 billion. Because of the technicalities of the federal budgeting process, transit operating assistance suffered the deepest funding cuts.

Under TEA-21, the transit community can expect at least a 50 percent increase relative to the 6-year ISTEA appropriations. This funding—at least \$36 billion over 6 years—is already “paid for” under the congressional budget process, a dramatic new aspect of the bill that essentially guarantees the funding. In addition, the transit industry agreed to the elimination of operating assistance for large urbanized areas. In exchange, TEA-21 provides that preventive maintenance is an eligible capital expense for all transit agencies. This provision helps large transit systems offset the loss of operating assistance, which is retained for transit operators serving small urbanized and rural areas.

Because TEA-21's transit funding levels are guaranteed, transit agencies will be able to plan ahead for the next few years, knowing they can count on annual increases in federal funding. This assurance will be very helpful as transit agencies develop their long-term investment plans, enabling them to program their federal, state, and local funds more efficiently.

In addition, with TEA-21's strong emphasis on research and technology—critical to the long-term success of public transportation—we can expect a noticeable improvement in the ability of transit agencies to find cost-effective ways of meeting customer needs. Transit-related businesses will also

find it easier to provide quality products at competitive prices.

TEA-21 retains some tried-and-true research programs and adds some new ones. It creates a strategic planning process for determining priorities for national research and technology development, as well as for coordinating national activities and measuring results and impacts. The Transit Cooperative Research Program is authorized to receive \$8.25 million per year and the University Transportation Centers \$6 million per year. A fuel cell bus and bus facilities program is authorized to receive \$4.85 million per year, and an advanced-technology pilot program for low-speed magnetic levitation technology will receive \$5 million per year.

A Joint Partnership Program has also been created. The aim of this program is to promote the early deployment of innovations in services, management, operational practices, or technology that have broad applicability. Consortia of transit service providers and private businesses or research organizations will be encouraged, and must provide at least 50 percent of project costs.

Another new program is the International Mass Transit Program. This program is designed to keep the U.S. transit community informed about technological innovations that emerge internationally while providing opportunities for U.S. businesses to become more globally competitive. This goal is directly linked to an area on which the American Public Transit Association is focusing as well.

The new way of doing business under TEA-21 will make it easier to implement technological improvements. In particular, TEA-21 puts the federal government's seal of approval on intelligent transportation systems technology in general and transit ITS in particular. The message of ISTEA was that ITS looked promising and deserved a careful evaluation. TEA-21 builds on what has been learned about ITS in the past few years. Its message is that ITS is here to stay, and the transportation sector needs to ensure that the technology works well. Thus one of TEA-21's major themes is the importance of open architecture and standards

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designed to ensure that a region's diverse ITS users—including the transit agency, police force, fire department, emergency medical service, and traffic management systems—have compatible technology. More specifically, TEA-21 makes it clear that ITS is an eligible project cost under a wide variety of federal surface transportation programs, provided investments meet federal open architecture standards. Given the ease with which ideas and information can be exchanged via the Internet, we can expect nearly all successful innovative funding uses to be noticed and replicated.

My highest hope for TEA-21 extends beyond transit. I hope that TEA-21 will solidify commitment at the federal, state, and local levels to having an effective intermodal transportation system. Transit, highways, streets, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, airport access, freight mobility, and intercity passenger services must be linked with each other and designed to work well together. Achieving this goal will be good for the economy and good for the communities in which we live, and it is what our citizens—the users and funders of transportation—expect.

To a great extent, this intermodal system will rely on more efficient use of existing infrastructure, and that is where ITS comes in. By improving roadway throughput and making transit more attractive to potential customers, ITS can transform the nation's transportation system at a significant cost savings as compared with alternatives, such as major highway capacity expansion projects, we simply cannot afford.

I am convinced that ITS technology can assist transit systems in attracting new customers by alleviating many of the concerns that discourage some travelers from using transit. ITS can eliminate uncertainty about when the next bus or train will arrive and whether the traveler will make the connection to the next leg of the trip. ITS also offers great potential to alleviate security concerns. In addition, ITS can make it possible to reroute buses around traffic jams and accidents so that schedules can be maintained. For all these reasons, ITS is vital to creating convenient, affordable, and customer-oriented services.

In summary, TEA-21, through its expanded funding and emphasis on research and technology, holds great promise for the creation of transit-friendly, livable communities that will enhance our quality of life. Using the resources made available through TEA-21, APTA and its member organizations will be able to work with the U.S. Department of Transportation, other government agencies, and interest groups to make this vision a reality.

Key Changes for Transit Research Under TEA-21

- ◆ The Transit Cooperative Research Program is authorized at \$8.25 million annually. University Transportation Centers are authorized at \$6 million annually.
- ◆ A Joint Partnership Program for Deployment and Innovation is established to foster the formation of consortia that could include transit service providers and businesses and public or private research organizations. The consortia will be able to bid competitively for projects to deploy innovations and must provide at least 50 percent of the project costs.
- ◆ An International Mass Transit Program is created to inform the U.S. transit community about technological innovations in the international marketplace that could create opportunities for domestic businesses to become globally competitive in the export of mass transit products and services.
- ◆ A Fuel Cell Bus and Bus Facilities Program is authorized to receive \$4.85 million annually.
- ◆ An Advanced Technology Pilot Project for low-speed magnetic levitation technology is authorized at \$5 million per year.