The TE Argument

Every quarter, the NTEC staff gets together to discuss ideas about what to cover in the next issue of Connections. Has there been a new seminal publication? Have meaningful awards been handed out? Is there a great Transportation Enhancements (TE) project in the works? Sometimes, though, we like to reflect on the TE program from a broader perspective. Right now, the transportation world is anticipating the next surface transportation reauthorization bill scheduled for 2009. This is the proverbial calm before the storm, when we can reflect on what TE has contributed to the nation’s transportation needs, and what role TE might play into the future.

Who could have foreseen in 1991 when the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) passed that the TE program would become so influential? Since its rather humble inception, TE has become a vital tool for state transportation agencies and communities to fund projects that enhance transportation while increasing the quality of life. With the creation of the TE program, Congress signaled its intention to provide funding for a broad array of projects designed to maximize the potential of transportation to invigorate communities. Sixteen years later, with nearly 9 billion dollars provided to the states and over 23,000 projects on the ground, the TE program is a resounding popular and practical success and delivers on Congress’ intent, and constituents needs, every day.
The TE program came together out of a mix of interest at the advocate level and in Congress to provide funding for transportation-related projects that were being overlooked by the traditional highway funding mechanism. Some congressional supporters also sought to provide a measure of mitigation for the impacts of previous federal aid highway projects. The result was 10 eligible project categories (expanded to the current 12 categories in 1998 with the passage of TEA-21). While apparently dissimilar, TE categories have a commonality: all projects must relate to surface transportation. Beyond that, all TE projects also contribute to improving communities. While in the beginning of the program the connections to transportation were sometimes weak, they became stronger and better understood as the program evolved.

Today TE is a robust program that is counted on by numerous communities to deliver essential transportation facilities. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which was intimately involved in the creation of the TE program and its continued inclusion in subsequent transportation acts, sees TE as “the nation’s top source of funding for trails, walking, and biking, vital aspects of our nation’s mobility strategy” according to Kevin Mills, VP for Policy. Steve Elkinton, Program Leader in the National Trails System Program, National Park Service, says of TE “Since 1991, Transportation Enhancements has been the largest investment in trails of all types made by any government in the history of the world.”

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, which partnered with Rails-to-Trails Conservancy to support the creation and subsequent reauthorizations of the program, sees TE as helping revitalize communities and restore landscapes adversely affected by transportation decision of years go by. This explains why preservation activities are included in the enhancement program. According to Emily Wadham, Vice President for Public Policy, National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Communities use this funding to implement transportation-related projects around the country from historic bridge and train depot rehabilitations to the revitalization of streetscapes and improved pedestrian access in downtowns.”

At the core of this argument are the issues of whether improving and enhancing the transportation experience beyond the minimum requirements of a functional system is a valid transportation goal and whether or not walking and bicycling are legitimate transportation modes. Despite its successes, TE is not universally appreciated. Some criticize the TE program for diverting needed federal funds from “real” transportation.

Most vulnerable to attack are TE projects in the historic preservation categories. The goal of those projects is to preserve historic surface transportation facilities such as railroad stations and bridges, or elements of the landscape that are closely tied to the transportation history. To date, Congress has not found this opposition persuasive and TE remains intact and is more robustly funded each time our surface transportation law is reauthorized. The Federal Highway Administration helps protect the program by holding all projects to a rigorous “relationship to transportation” standard.

Despite the opinion of detractors, surveys on transportation from groups as diverse as AAA, the Surface Transportation Policy Project, and America Bikes show that Americans want more than just sterile highways for their transportation dollars. These sentiments are borne out by state transportation agencies regularly reporting that they have 3 times the number of qualified applicants for TE funds than they have funds available.

The power and success of the program as a whole stems from the flexibility it affords to communities to define for themselves projects that will improve their transportation networks. This flexibility arises because the individual categories are defined broadly enough while the 12 categories are diverse enough to allow projects to receive cross funding. For example, the Katy trail featured in this quarter’s Connections received funding for the trail itself and funding to restore a historical depot along the trail that provides bathrooms to trail users while providing a link to the railroading past of the region.

TE also delivers on a bigger scale. In this time of global climate change, a growing obesity epidemic, and traffic congestion, TE funds projects that provide sustainable solutions addressing all three of these problems. As such, TE projects are models for Context Sensitive Design, Smart Growth, and other concepts of sustainability, improving and expanding our transportation infrastructure. In conclusion, TE is a program that works, has over 23,000 projects to prove it, and is greatly influencing what people at the community level think their surface transportation system can and should be.
The Katy Rail-Trail: a 225 Mile TE Success Story (& growing...)

$2.7 Million Dollars In TE Funds have gone towards projects on or along the trail.

Heath Meriwether had stumbled onto an incredible resource—an unbroken, 225-mile rail-trail running from St. Charles, right outside of St. Louis on Missouri’s eastern border, nearly all the way across the state to Clinton (and connected to Columbia by a trail spur). The change was all the more abrupt since he had missed the years-long conversion process. “I was astounded by and thrilled that something that had been such an eyesore,” he says, “had been turned into this absolutely wonderful linear park along these beautiful Missouri River bluffs.”

Meriwether, former executive editor of the Detroit Free Press, spent his childhood in Columbia, Mo., in the 1950s and 60s. His family lived only a few miles from the once sprawling Missouri-Kansas-Texas (or Katy) Railroad, but Meriwether mostly remembered the rail corridor as a forlorn, almost dislocated strip of community history. “When I was growing up,” he says, “the Katy was a down-at-the-mouth, dilapidated railroad.”

After he graduated from the University of Missouri and moved away in 1966, Meriwether rarely saw his hometown again until 1990. The railroad of his memories, though, had vanished. “I was visiting my mom in the hospital,” he says, “and then sort of to unwind, I found the Katy Railroad in its new form, which was the Katy Trail,” now operated by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MDNR).

What soon defined his relationship to the new rail-trail was its developing emotional association with his mother. “I just found the trail extremely peaceful and calming and regenerative,” he says. “It gave me spiritual sanctuary at a time when my mother was dying.”

Building the Katy Trail, however, took much effort. “The big opposition was mainly a lot of noise,” says Pat Jones of Williamsburg, Mo., who, with her late husband Ted, helped fast-track the trail’s development. She recalls that some local organizations, including the Missouri Farm Bureau, stirred up groundless fears of crime on the trail and local landowners losing property rights. “Any change makes you worry,” she says, “but a little sharing goes a long way.”

Indeed the Jones family gave the Katy Trail a hearty two-handed push when they bought 200 miles of the corridor’s right-of-way and then donated it to the state to get the trail built. Their only stipulation in the hand-over? Be a good neighbor.

The project quickly took-off, and transportation enhancements (TE) funding has since added more than $2.7 million through 2006, helping boost everything from trail development to bicycle and pedestrian amenities to preservation of historic transportation facilities along the trail—like the depot in Sedalia.

Economic advantage, transportation options, and recreation are hardly the trail’s only mass appeals. More than half of the crushed limestone pathway—the longest continu-
ous rail-trail in the country—re-traces prominent historical footsteps as it follows the original route of Lewis and Clark’s westward exploration. The trail hugs the Missouri River and its knobby entourage of hills and forested valleys during this eastern stretch. Then, when the Katy Trail splits from the river near Boonville, the corridor strolls through the state’s crop-striped countryside and prairie, with community pit-stops never more than a handful of miles apart.

“The thing that always stuck with me was the emotional experience of the Katy Trail,” Meriwether says. While not everyone may share his particular relationship with the trail, few people who use the corridor—including many of those who initially opposed it—still doubt the trail’s enormous value.

From Marthasville to Hartsburg to Defiance, says Sue Holst of the MDNR, the Katy Trail brought “new life” to once struggling railroad communities, even in its first few years. The pathway has since entrenched itself in Missouri’s landscape and personality, as a transportation option, recreational facility and an economic boon. This past September, to recognize the corridor’s many successes, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy inducted it as the second member of the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame.

The Katy trail, encompassing 10 TE projects in three different categories representing $2.7 million, is one of the great examples of the enduring impact of the TE program around the country.

RESOURCES

The Active Living By Design website, which provides expertise regarding routine physical activity including through active transportation, includes a number of resources useful to bicycle and pedestrian researchers and advocates. This includes fact sheets about land use, transportation, greenways and others including definitions, statistics and supporting research. Toolkits regarding a variety of issues ranging from transportation to land use and design are also available on the website. These tools are available at: www.activelivingbydesign.org

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration resource guide on laws related to pedestrian and bicycle safety is available for download. This resource guide contains a compilation of vehicle and traffic laws that were judged by the guide’s developers to have the potential to affect pedestrian or bicycle safety, either positively or negatively. It is designed for easy use by anyone interested in vehicle and traffic law and pedestrian or bicycle safety. It can be used to select laws that enhance pedestrian or bicycle safety, to assess a state’s position with respect to other states or the state of the art, or to examine the extent to which prevailing vehicle and traffic laws may impact the generation of pedestrian or bicycle crashes. The guide is available at: www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/ped/resourceguide/index.html

The Vorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University has a bicycle and pedestrian image library available, organized by the following: bicycle, community, design, path/trail, pedestrian, poor design, safe routes to school, traffic calming, and transit. The photographs on the site can be used for non-commercial purposes without prior written permission, with the author of the photograph given due credit. These images, available at medium resolutions, can aid in illustrating both good and bad design. The image library is available at: www.njbikeped.org/index.php

CONFERENCES

APRIL
APA NATIONAL CONFERENCE
April 27-May 1, 2008 • Las Vegas, Nevada
http://www.planning.org/2008conference/

CONGRESS FOR THE NEW URBANISM XVI
April 3-6, 2008 • Austin, Texas
http://www.cnu.org/cnuxvi/

JUNE
INTERNATIONAL MAKING CITIES LIVABLE CONFERENCE
June 1-5, 2008 • Santa Fe, New Mexico
http://www.livablecities.org/46ConfSantaFe.htm

SEPTEMBER
PRO WALK/PRO BIKE
September 2-5, 2008 • Seattle, Washington
http://www.bikewalk.org/conference.php
On Thursday, March 6, 2008, the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) ordered states to return $3.15 billion in transportation funds. Such “rescission” orders have historically resulted in disproportionate attacks on TE. This rescission, however, was different.

In June 2007, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy worked with Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.) and other supporters to pass legislation protecting TE from disproportionate future cuts. By helping to develop and advocate for the policy, and supporting it with legal analysis, RTC assisted Rep. Oberstar’s work, and an amendment (H.R. 2701, Sec. 252. in the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007) ensuring proportionality was passed by Congress. As a result of this powerful 2007 decision, the USDOT is now legally required to limit the amount each state can cut from its TE program.

Had states been able to cut TE in this rescission order at a rate similar to recent rescissions, TE could have lost two to three times as much in funding. Given the provision that cuts must be fair and balanced across programs, TE should now lose less than $100 million—saving $100 to $200 million nationally to spend on rail-trails, bicycling and other valuable projects.

**KENTUCKY**

The Kentucky Lincoln Heritage Trail is a scenic route across central Kentucky to be designated by 27 markers and including signature historic sites in Hodgenville, Lexington, Louisville, Frankfort, Elizabethtown, Nicholasville, Springfield and Richmond as well as additional sites across the state that illuminate Lincoln’s life.

Highlighting each of these, the Web site also features other historic Kentucky places located nearby, to extend visitor interest beyond the trail itself. This new trail reinterprets and updates the original Lincoln Heritage Trail which was created in the early 1960s through Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois.

The Kentucky Lincoln Heritage Trail is a project of the Kentucky Heritage Council/State Historic Preservation Office in partnership with the Kentucky Historical Society, Kentucky Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, Kentucky Department of Tourism and Kentucky Transportation Cabinet.

The inaugural marker unveiled Tuesday by Governor Beshear depicts the founding of Hodgen’s Mill – the community that came to be known as Hodgenville – and the connection between this early settlement and the Lincoln family. Remaining markers will be placed throughout the spring, including directional and highway signage.

Like the real locations along the trail itself, the Web site at http://www.kylincolntrail.com/ maps the Kentucky people, places and events that shaped the Lincoln legacy and tell the story of his early years in Kentucky.

The Web site includes a numbered listing of the markers and text on each as well as information and links about the local community and nearby points of interest.

A key feature is an interactive map of Kentucky with icons and pop-ups offering more information about each of the heritage trail sites including driving directions, Web links and phone numbers. In addition to the Web site, the trail is featured in a colorful new folding map designed to guide automobile travelers along the route.

Research and development of the trail, signs and collateral materials were developed through federal Transportation Enhancement funding with support from each of the partner agencies.

[Kentucky Post, February 11, 2008]

**GREAT FALLS, MONTANA**

A new plaza in front of the Great Falls Library has come one step closer to completion with the construction of a stone arch by the Bozeman artist and stonemason Zak Zakovi. The 15 ton stone arch will be the centerpiece of the beautification project in front of the library.

“We’re really trying to create a dynamic physical presence for the downtown area,” library director Jim Heckel said last week. The $200,000 project, funded in part with a Transportation Enhancement award and local donations, is converting a poorly used fountain into central gateway for people coming to the library.

Library customers will be able to walk under the arch if they like, but with water trickling down through the archway from the top, patrons could get wet by cutting under it.

Either way, the stone structure will be safe, as well as spectacular: the sections of stone are connected by stainless-steel pins, and the stone is carefully cut to fit together.

Now that the centerpiece is constructed, the plaza project is expected to be completed in September. In addition to beautifying the area, this project will also provide a gateway to the newly-enhanced library, which has added gallery space and new computers.
The Greenway along Lake Champlain in Burlington, Vermont is a favorite among both residents and visitors. The Greenway project was funded with $1,016,000 in TE funds and $254,000 local match. It consists of a 7.6 mile route that runs from the southern end of Burlington at Oakledge Park to the northern end at the Winooski River, where it connects via the newly constructed bridge to the Colchester Bike Path. The Greenway rides along the Lake Champlain shoreline, offering views of the lake and the Adirondack Mountains to the west. The Greenway links six major waterfront parks, along with the Burlington High School and the central Waterfront district. More photos of this and other TE projects are available in our online image library at www.enhancements.org/library.

Connections is a quarterly publication of the National Transportation Enhancements Clearinghouse sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration. Submission of articles as well as letters and other comments are welcome.

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