Synthesis of Information Related to Transit Problems

This is a staff digest of the progress and status of TCRP Project J-7, “Synthesis of Information Related to Transit Problems,” for which the Transportation Research Board is the agency conducting the research. Individual studies for the project are managed by Donna L. Vlasak, Senior Program Officer, with assistance from Jon Williams, Manager, Synthesis Studies, serving under the Studies and Information Services Division of the Transportation Research Board, Stephen R. Godwin, Director.

BACKGROUND

The Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) was established in 1992. The U.S. Department of Transportation proposed the TCRP, and it was authorized in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991. The program was reauthorized in the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). On May 13, 1992, a memorandum agreement outlining operating procedures for the TCRP was executed by three cooperating organizations: the Federal Transit Administration (FTA); the National Academy of Sciences, acting through the Transportation Research Board (TRB); and the Transit Development Corporation, Inc. (TDC), a non-profit educational and research organization established by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA). The memorandum agreement was updated on January 12, 1999.

INTRODUCTION

Administrators, transit general managers and their staff, and researchers continually face problems on which much information already exists, either in documented form or in terms of undocumented experience and practice. Unfortunately, this information is frequently fragmented, scattered, and underevaluated. Often it is unknown to the person normally responsible for making decisions related to the topic. As a consequence, full knowledge of what has been learned about a problem is frequently not brought to bear on its solution. Costly research findings may go unused, valuable experience may be overlooked, and due consideration may not be given to recommended practices for solving or alleviating the problem.

A storehouse of information exists on nearly every subject of concern to the transit industry. Much of this information has resulted from both research and the successful application of solutions to the challenging issues faced by practitioners in their daily work. Because there has been no systematic means for compiling such useful information and making it available to the

Suggestions for synthesis topics may be sent to the TCRP Manager or Synthesis Staff at any time (see address on back). You can submit your suggestions at http://www4.trb.org/trb/synthrep.nsf, under Suggest a TCRP synthesis topic. Topics suggested must be accompanied by a brief scope statement, including a discussion of the problem (a paragraph or two). A title (preferably 10 words or less) and the name and affiliation of the submitter are also necessary. Identification of information sources is appreciated. Suggestions for updates of published syntheses would also be appreciated. If a topic is not selected, the problem statement must be resubmitted the following year to be considered. Annually, synthesis topics are typically due by the end of March. The TCRP Oversight Panel for the project meets in May/June to select new topics based on funding available.

Interested in writing a synthesis? For details contact Donna L. Vlasak by e-mail at dvlasak@nas.edu or by phone at 202/334-2974 or Jon Williams at jwilliams@nas.edu or by phone at 202/334-3245.
entire transit community, the TOPS Committee—an independent governing board organized by the TDC and designated the TCRP Oversight and Project Selection Committee—authorized TRB to undertake a series of studies to search out and synthesize useful knowledge from all available sources and to prepare documented reports on current practices in the subject areas of concern. Reports from this endeavor constitute a TCRP report series, Synthesis of Transit Practice, that collects and assembles the various forms of information into single concise documents pertaining to specific transit problems or sets of closely related problems.

THE SYNTHESIS PROGRAM

This synthesis series reports on various practices, making recommendations where appropriate. Each document is a compendium of the best knowledge available on measures found to be successful in resolving specific problems. To develop these syntheses in a comprehensive manner and to ensure inclusion of significant knowledge, TRB analyzes available information assembled from numerous sources including a large number of transit agencies. A panel of experts in the subject area is established to guide the researchers in organizing and evaluating data collected on each topic and to review the synthesis report.

For each topic, the project objectives are (1) to locate and assemble documented information; (2) to learn what practice has been used for solving or alleviating problems; (3) to identify all ongoing research; (4) to learn what problems remain largely unsolved; and (5) to organize, evaluate, and document the useful information that is acquired.

Each synthesis is an immediately useful document that records practices that were acceptable within the limitations of the knowledge available at the time of its preparation. As the processes of advancement continue, new knowledge can be expected to be added to that which is now on hand; eventually the synthesis may need to be updated or redone. If you believe that a synthesis should be updated, please contact TRB and let us know.

Selection of Topics

TCRP Project Panel J-7 meets each year to select topics for study using funds from the upcoming fiscal year. The membership of this committee is given in Table 1. Current funding allows for initiation of approximately four syntheses per year.

The following factors are considered in the selection process for synthesis topics:

- The problem should be widespread enough to generate broad interest in the synthesis.
- The problem should be timely and critical with respect to economic impact, safety, or social impact.
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Conduct of the Studies

Throughout the year, following the J-7 project panel’s selection of topics, studies are initiated in the order of priority assigned by the committee. A panel consisting of practitioners and researchers is formed for each topic. At its first meeting, this topic panel thoroughly discusses the topic, refines the tentative scope, suggests sources of information, and selects potential topic consultants.

Following this meeting, an agreement is negotiated with a consultant to gather information on the topic, synthesize it, and draft a report. Typically, the agreement covers a period of 15 months. Information gathering and preparation of the first draft of the synthesis report usually takes 8 months. This draft is then reviewed by the topic panel with the consultant, often at a second panel meeting. Subsequent drafts and a meeting are scheduled if needed, although this rarely occurs.

After the staff is substantially satisfied with the report, a final draft is sent to the members of the TCRP Project Panel J-7 for their approval. At the same time, members from the topic panel have their last chance to review the report. Comments from these reviews are incorporated into the final report, which is usually published as a TCRP Synthesis of Transit Practice.

Studies in Progress as of April 2002

Work is currently under way on the topics listed in Table 2. Questions on these topics should be addressed to the Project Study Manager, Donna L. Vlasak (e-mail: dvlasak@nas.edu and 202/334-2974) or the Synthesis Studies Manager, Jon Williams (e-mail: jwilliams@nas.edu and 202/334-3245).
Available Publications

The Syntheses of Transit Practice that have been completed under this project are listed in Table 3. Copies of these syntheses can be obtained from the Publications Office, Transportation Research Board, 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20418; by calling 202/334-3213; and through the Internet at: http://www.trb.org/trb/bookstore.

Please send check orders to: TRB, Lockbox 289, Washington, D.C., 20055 or fax to: 202/334-2519.

Index of Topic Studies

Table 4 is a key word index of published syntheses and studies currently in progress.
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