

Impressions of a First-Time Attendee

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On the afternoon of December 15, 2004, I heard three wonderful words: “You’ve been approved.” My employer, the New York State Department of Transportation (DOT), had agreed to send me to my first TRB annual meeting in a 22-year career. This was perhaps the best year for me to attend the meeting. In the past several months, I had become more involved in TRB activities, through participation on a National Cooperative Highway Research Program project panel and selection to a standing committee. I also was in the early stages of cosponsoring a research proposal. Moreover, New York State DOT Commissioner Joseph Boardman would take office as the next chair of the TRB Executive Committee during the meeting.

I arrived on the afternoon of Saturday, January 8, to ensure that I wouldn’t miss any sessions. After registering for the meeting at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, I promptly attached to my name tag the white ribbon that signifies new attendee. That way, if I did or said anything foolish, people might give me the benefit of the doubt—a strategy that paid off more than once!

I quickly realized that annual meeting attendees maximize their time when I saw the crowded hotel gym at 6:30 a.m., likely the only free time all day. Their dedication was further validated by the standing-room-only attendance at the 8:30 a.m. session. For the next 4 days, I was amazed by the scale and complexity of the annual meeting, as well as by the quality of presentations, the caliber of speakers, and the resourcefulness of the TRB staff who keep the mega event running smoothly. Just as impressive was the participants’ collective knowledge of a broad spectrum of transportation specialties and issues.

Because my work at New York State DOT focuses on freight transportation and economic development projects, I was primarily interested in sessions on the transportation of freight by rail and

maritime modes. The selection of interesting and beneficial sessions on the topic was vast, but I could not possibly attend all, so I had to make many difficult choices.

All of the sessions I attended were outstanding. The material presented was visually and intellectually engaging; it routinely yielded more questions than time allowed; and it spurred additional post-session inquiries, discussions, and analyses.

One of the most worthwhile sessions was Session 127, Innovations in Project Delivery and Financing for Surface Transportation Infrastructure. The all-day Sunday workshop provided a thorough and thought-provoking discussion of public-private partnerships (PPP). I gained insight on what is needed to ensure a successful PPP and what federal programs and resources are available to support continued and expanded use. A highlight on Monday was Session 283, Transportation from the Customer’s Perspective: Mega-Trends in Delivering the Goods. The session provided the carrier, federal, and state perspectives on transporting freight internationally.

Committee meetings also proved to be rewarding. On Monday, I received my first committee assignment from the International Trade and Transportation



Meeting authors at poster sessions.

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Participating in committee meetings

Committee. Later that evening, at the Intercity Rail Passenger Systems Committee meeting, Randy Wade of Wisconsin DOT and I presented an overview of our joint research proposal for improved methods of rail preservation cost allocation for shared-use rail systems. The presentation was repeated on Tuesday at the Freight Transportation Economics and Regulations Committee meeting and on Wednesday at the Local and Regional Rail Freight Transport Committee meeting. The level of interest and support from these three committees was gratifying.

Although at times overwhelmed and disoriented by the scope of the event, I attended or participated in nearly everything I had scheduled. The annual meeting planning tool on TRB's website was particularly helpful in prioritizing my meetings and sessions.

What I would do differently next time is read more of the papers on the Compendium of Papers CD-ROM before the presentations. I also would spend more time at poster sessions, because they allow for personal discussions with authors. Finally, I would visit more exhibits to obtain the valuable documents, software, and other information they make available.

As outstanding as my first annual meeting was, future meetings could be even better. Attendees may benefit from advance copies of PowerPoint presentations from sessions, either in hard copy or electronic files. This would allow challenged note takers—like myself—to focus more attention on listening to key points, instead of trying to copy down detailed information, such as tables and charts.

Attending my first annual meeting certainly rates as one of the formative experiences of my career. Perhaps if I had attended a meeting earlier in my career, the effect could have been greater. TRB is increasing efforts to involve younger professionals and graduate students in annual meeting activities. For employees of government agencies and private-sector firms with tightening travel budgets, expanded use and development of Internet e-sessions could lessen the impact of missing the meeting. TRB already posts some e-sessions online with real-time audio and PowerPoint presentations. Perhaps in the future, the staff can incorporate streaming video, too.

In conclusion, my first TRB annual meeting was highly worthwhile. I look forward to the privilege of attending and participating in future meetings.

Mark Norman, Technical Activities Director, responds:

TRB thanks John Bell for these impressions of a first-time attendee. His suggestions and those we have received from others for future improvements are being considered by the organizers of the TRB Annual Meeting. According to a February 2005 survey of annual meeting attendees, 91 percent of the more than 2,000 respondents rated the meeting as good to excellent, with only 1 percent ranking the meeting as fair or poor. We have already identified scores of improvements that will be implemented for the 2006 Annual Meeting as we strive to continuously improve the experience for first timers and veterans alike.

Selecting an itinerary of technical sessions.

