

UTC Spotlight

University Transportation Centers Program

This month: Special Edition: 2010 Spotlight Conference Follow Up | May 2011

UTC Spotlight Conference Focuses on Need for Research to Satisfy Diverse Demands of Livable Communities

The diverse assemblage of participants at last October's fifth annual UTC Spotlight Conference was a testament to the wide-ranging nature of livability and the need for different solutions tailored to different communities—from the most rural to the most urban. The meeting was organized by the Transportation Research Board and supported by the USDOT Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA).

The conference illustrated how the UTCs and the UTC program can lead in tackling complex interdisciplinary transportation research and education problems. Livability is harder to define than other topics, such as freight, demographics, and infrastructure, discussed at earlier Spotlight Conferences. This element of ambiguity forced attendees to critically evaluate broad, big picture research issues as well as specific questions related to livability.

The keynote address was delivered by Beth Osborne, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy at USDOT. Ms. Osborne captured the essence of the livability issue for participants by focusing on six principles: 1) providing more transportation choices, 2) expanding location- and energy-efficient housing choices, 3) improving economic competitiveness of neighborhoods by increasing reliable access to basic services, 4) targeting Federal fund-

ing toward existing communities through transit-oriented development and place-based policies, 5) aligning Federal policies and funding to remove barriers to collaboration, and 6) enhancing the unique characteristics of all communities (rural/suburban/urban).



RITA staff photo

An attentive driver gives a cyclist plenty of room along a rural road in northern Montana. During the Spotlight Conference participants were challenged to define livability for both rural and urban places.

Livability is about making transportation more than just capacities, volumes, vehicle-miles traveled, and level of services on highways. It is about making transportation more integrated with land use, housing, and jobs. It is about preserving landscapes and the environment, improving the quality of places, and the quality of life. It's about place making. Many have been demanding this "MORE" from transportation for a long time. It is easy to demand, hard to

implement, and hard to know which research on methods and data to conduct next. The October conference revealed that we simply do not have enough research on this topic and demonstrated that transportation researchers, educators and practitioners must become even more interdisciplinary than they already are.

Transportation systems that create livability are systems that work with land use to give everyone multiple travel choices for meeting their daily needs—affordably, safely, conveniently, and efficiently. This represents a major shift in how we view and manage our transportation system.

Some conference attendees made the point that sustainability and livability were not the same thing. Some suggested sustainability be defined as a limit on livability, that we must use our energy wisely and impose on the environment minimally or transportation solutions for livability will not provide livability for very long.

Attendees were pleased that safety was included as an explicit part of livability, but not just the safety normally associated with traffic engineering. Safety is not only the risk of crash, it is personal safety (being safe from crime), it is physical safety (ensuring older citizens do not fall on icy sidewalks), and perceived safety, which affects our behavior.

Livability includes research methods and metrics from the public health community, developers, business, sociologists, and others. There was a lot of discussion of institutional barriers—not just the agency or academic silos we often discuss, but also project thinking and embedded design manuals and concepts that are outdated. Speakers pointed to frameworks for ensuring valid, effective metrics, but many worried we did not have the data to accomplish adequate livability measurements.

The conference group was clearly warned by panelists to be careful not to prescribe one vision of livability for everyone. Researchers need to figure out if we can offer

diversity in livability. For example, while we assume livability is driving less, for some people livability may mean driving more.

As economic and social challenges continue nationally, it is likely the discussion regarding livability and related concepts for transportation systems has just begun. The October 2010 conference illustrated that UTCs can raise a unique voice in those discussions. ♻️

Points raised at the Conference related to what the UTC program can do to advance Transportation Systems for Livable Communities:

- Create UTCs focused on livability.
- Require even more interdisciplinary work than already occurs within the UTC program.
- Motivate the changes in education and workforce development needed to approach transportation in newer ways.
- Fund the “invention” of new ways to provide accessible transportation services (system components/modes that have not even been thought of yet).

About This Conference

The 2010 “Transportation for Livable Communities” conference was the fifth annual Spotlight Conference sponsored by the Research and Innovative Technology Administration and the Transportation Research Board. Each annual conference focuses on a specific transportation-related issue or problem facing the Nation. The conference was chaired by Lisa Aultman-Hall (laultman@uvm.edu), University of Vermont Transportation Research Center. The conference planning committee consisted of a diverse group of experts from academia, industry, and government who are involved in livability issues as they relate to the transportation enterprise. Committee members included: Diana J. Bauer, U.S. Department of Energy; Roderick B. Diaz, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority; Robert Dunphy, Urban Land Institute; Susan L. Handy, University of California, Davis; Gabe Klein, (formerly with) District of Columbia Department of Transportation; Shawn Turner, Texas Transportation Institute; and Martin Tuttle, CALTRANS. TRB liaison for the conference was Thomas Palmerlee (tpalmerlee@nas.edu). For more information about the conference, go to: <http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/conferences/2010/Livability/Program.pdf>.

This newsletter highlights some recent accomplishments and products from one University Transportation Center (UTC). The views presented are those of the authors and not necessarily the views of the Research and Innovative Technology Administration or the U.S. Department of Transportation, which administers the UTC program.

