

With

MILES

to Go ...



Rural Mobility, Accessibility Create Challenges in the Northeast

The New England Transportation Institute is conducting a three-year study on rural transportation, focusing on mobility, safety and connectivity.

By Karen Imas

The rural town center—local main streets, town doctors, mom and pop shops—has taken a hit. Rapid demographic change in rural areas is impacting mobility and accessibility for residents of these regions.

“The reliance on the short trip, such as getting to the general store, has decreased,” said Matt Coogan, director of the New England Transportation Institute (NETI). “People are moving to rural areas and imposing longer trip distances to work and school.”

Coogan is conducting a three-year study funded by SAFETEA-LU, the federal transportation legislation, to evaluate elements concerning rural transport in three areas—rural mobility, rural safety and issues of connectivity in the system for its residents.

In the first research focus area, the grant will support activities which establish a portrait of rural transportation patterns. Applying the concepts of both mobility and accessibility to the rural Northeast, the project will explore the issue of rural isolation.

- How serious a problem is rural isolation and perceptions of access (or lack thereof)?
- How are we resettling the rural areas?
- How are demographics going to change the demands made on the transportation system?

- Are there alternative settlement patterns, with alternative transportation implications?

“Isolation occurs when the local store closes down because of the opening of a regional retail center many miles away. Isolation occurs when the local doctor is replaced by a regional medical center, also many miles away,” said Coogan. “In many rural areas, the support function of the local small town has disappeared; and the most basic trips are now longer in distance.”

The demographics in rural areas, including parts of New England, compound the challenge of isolation and mobility. The rural institutions needed to deal with the change in the baby boomer generation either do not exist or are simply not scaled for the coming challenge.

The study also will explore the extent to which concepts associated with Smart Growth are and are not applicable to settlement patterns in the rural Northeast. Smart Growth solutions acknowledge that very long trip distances have become a problem.

Alternative patterns are being proposed across the region but the question remains whether they will gain traction in rural areas. Initiatives to address accessibility have been introduced in rural areas across the country. The city of Burlington, Vt., created bus service for a new downtown mall. Ridership has been increasing.

Maine implemented a more unconventional program where retired individuals with driver’s licenses transport seniors who are no longer able to drive, to doctors’ appointments. The program basically connects those who need a ride to the hospital with those

who have a ride to offer. By being a driver, one accumulates points to have the same services rendered in return.

“In cities, you can take a train or bus to the hospital,” said Coogan. “Aging and mobility is a serious subject everywhere in the U.S. but moreso in rural areas where there is limited public transit.”

Coogan’s next phase of research is centered on implications for safety and health in transportation. NETI will work with other major researchers to examine the behavioral basis of transportation patterns with major safety implications, with a particular emphasis on the question of speeding in rural areas by younger drivers, which could be tied to higher death rates in those areas. Rural young males between 18 and 28 have a death rate on the highways that is five times that of their urban counterparts.

The physical dispersal of places of employment, medical services and schools in rural areas also impacts health in that individuals have no choice but to drive rather than walk.

NETI, in partnership with the University of Vermont, will host a conference this summer on safety and health issues. Coogan hopes the scientific research that will be presented will eventually work its way into public policy.

NETI’s mission is to promote regional and national understanding of rural transportation trends and issues through research and related learning activities.

—Karen Imas is director of communications and leadership training for The Council of State Governments Eastern Regional Conference.

The 61st Annual Meeting of the Southern Legislative Conference

The 61st Annual Meeting of the Southern Legislative Conference will be held in Williamsburg, Virginia, July 14-18, 2007. This historic setting provides an excellent backdrop for the consideration of the range of issues before Southern legislatures. The meeting also will take place in the 400th anniversary year of the settlement at Jamestown, a cause for celebration across the country.

Meeting information and registration materials are available online at www.slcatlanta.org or by calling the SLC at 404/633-1866

Williamsburg 2007



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