

Progress Report on the U.S. Government Efforts Promoting Bicycle Use and Safety

Funding Bicycle Projects and Programs at the Local Level

John Fegan
Federal Highway Administration
HEPH, Room 3301, 400 Seventh St SW, Washington D.C. 20590, USA
Email: john.fegan@fhwa.dot.gov

Summary

The role of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) is to administer national transportation legislation passed by the U.S. Congress, distribute federal funds to States and localities, and to provide technical assistance as required. The National Bicycling and Walking Study was required by the Congress. In addition, two recent pieces of Federal Legislation, (the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 and the Transportation Equity Act (TEA-21) of 1998), provide the mechanisms and Federal funds for transportation projects in the U.S. These two acts amended existing law and called for a more balanced transportation system in the United States that provides connections among transportation modes and also offers individuals choices in the mode of transportation they can use for individual trips. This will be a significant shift from a transportation system almost totally dependent on the use of the private motor vehicle. Both ISTEA and TEA-21 rely heavily on planning processes at State and metropolitan levels of government, and delegate the responsibility for selecting particular projects for funding to the States and Metropolitan units of government. In addition, both pieces of legislation have made bicycle projects and programs broadly eligible for the major funding program, but funding is not guaranteed.

Since 1991 Federal dollars spent on bicycle and pedestrian projects have increased from about 4 million U.S. dollars in 1991 to 238 million dollars in 1997. In fact, from 1991-1998 at least one billion dollars have been spent on bicycle (and pedestrian projects and programs). That is still less than one percent of the money potentially available. The lessons learned will be presented.

1. Introduction

The United States Department of Transportation (DOT) is responsible for interpreting legislation passed by the U.S. Congress, administering the provisions of that legislation, distributing federal transportation funding to States and local units of government, and for providing technical assistance as required. These responsibilities are carried out at a national level using offices in a central location (Washington D.C.) as well as offices located in each of the 50 States.

2. Federal Transportation Legislation

2.1 The National Bicycling and Walking Study (NBWS)

The requirement to conduct the NBWS was passed by the U.S. Congress and it directed the US DOT to develop a plan for the increased use and safety of bicycling and walking and to identify the resources necessary to achieve this plan. The NBWS identified two national goals: (1) to double the percent of transportation trips made by bicycling and walking; and (2) to reduce by ten percent the number of fatalities and injuries occurring to bicyclists and pedestrians. Proposed action plans were prepared for Federal, State, and local entities.

2.2 The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA)

ISTEA was passed in 1991 and provided mechanisms and federal funding for transportation projects for a period of six years. It called for the development of a

“National Intermodal Transportation System that is economically efficient and environmentally sound, provides the foundation for the Nation to compete in the

global economy, and will move people and goods in an energy efficient manner. The National Intermodal Transportation System shall consist of all forms of transportation in a unified, interconnected manner... to reduce energy consumption and air pollution, while promoting economic development...”

Federal transportation funds are distributed to States and regional units of government by legislative formula. ISTEA strengthened the role of the planning process at the State and regional levels of government. A multimodal long range transportation plan covering the next twenty years was also required. ISTEA also required that any project to be funded must be shown on a list of projects called a transportation improvement program (TIP). Bicycle projects were given broad eligibility for all of the major funding programs, but were not guaranteed any funding. In essence, bicycle projects must compete for funding against all other transportation projects and the funding decisions are made either at the State or regional levels of government. Federal transportation funding for bicycle facilities can use funds from the following programs:

- National Highway System
- Surface Transportation Program
- Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program
- Recreational Trails Program
- Federal Lands Highway Program
- National Scenic Byways Program
- Job Access and Reverse Commute Grants
- High Priority Projects
- Transit Urbanized Area Formula Grants, Capital Investment Grants and Loans, and Formula Program for Other than Urbanized Area
- Transit Enhancement Activity
- State and Community Highway Safety Grants

It should be noted, that the legislation requires that a bicycle facility project “must be principally for transportation, rather than recreation, purposes”. ISTEA also called for the creation of the position of bicycle and pedestrian coordinator in each State Department of Transportation.

For each project funded the Federal share of funds is eighty percent, with the remaining twenty percent coming from State or local sources.

2.3 The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21)

TEA-21 essentially continued the provisions of ISTEA with a few exceptions for funding bicycle projects. Previous prohibitions on motorized vehicle use on bicycle facilities were amended to allow, in certain circumstances, electric bicycles, and motorized wheelchairs. TEA-21 also called upon the U.S. DOT to develop “design guidance” language to make more explicit when facilities for bicyclists are to be included when any transportation projects are planned and designed. This design guidance was released in February 2000 and makes the provision of facilities for bicyclists (and pedestrians) the norm rather than the exception. In fact, when such provisions are not made, they must meet one of several “exceptional circumstances” clearly spelled out in the design guidance language. The U.S. DOT was also charged with developing a national bicycle safety education curriculum. Some technical changes were also made to the factors to be considered at State and regional levels in the planning process. Finally, TEA-21 called upon the U.S. DOT to award a grant for a Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Clearinghouse.

3. Response of the U.S. DOT

The actions taken at the Federal level since the passage of both ISTEA and TEA-21 can be categorized as follow:

3.1 Interpretation of Federal Legislation

Interpretation of the provisions of the legislation in the form of brochures, and detailed Program Guidance has been issued. The Program Guidance states:

“We expect every transportation agency to make accommodation for bicycling and walking a routine part of their planning, design construction, operations and maintenance activities.”

Similarly, the “design guidance” language previously discussed under the TEA-21 section above makes the provision of facilities for bicyclists (and pedestrians) the rule rather than the exception.

3.2 Followup with State and Regional Governmental Units

Finding ways of enhancing the implementation of bicycle projects has been the responsibility given to State and local offices. Specific roadblocks or unnecessary administrative procedures are being addressed and removed as necessary.

3.3 The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center (PBIC)

This Clearinghouse operation has developed a comprehensive website and answers technical queries from advocates and professionals via a toll free phone number. Training and conference planning are also among the tasks to be carried out by the PBIC. The volume of requests for technical assistance has been increasing since the opening of the PBIC.

It should be noted that while the Federal level of government has increased its activities relating to, and in support of bicycling, there have also been very significant increases in individual State and local efforts as well. All of these governmental efforts have been complementary to those of advocates and activists.

4. The Results of This Activity

4.1 NBWS Goal Attainment

It was mentioned that the NBWS had the two national goals of (1) doubling the percent of trips made by bicycling and walking; and (2) reducing by ten percent the number of injuries and fatalities occurring to bicyclists and pedestrians in crashes with motor vehicles. While the absolute number of trips made by bicycling (and walking) have increased so have the numbers of motor vehicle trips. Hence the ratio of nonmotorized to motorized trips has not doubled as yet. The results of the year 2000 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (NPTS) will offer further indications of the attainment of the use goal. With regard to attainment of the safety goal, there has been success in reducing the number of pedestrian fatalities by ten percent, but bicycle fatalities have only declined slightly. Similarly, larger percentage decreases in pedestrian injuries than those reported for bicyclist injuries have been found. Further efforts to attain these goals are underway.

4.2 Increase in Federal Funding

Dramatic increases in the amount of Federal transportation monies being spent on bicycle (and pedestrian) projects have been reported. In 1991, funding was about 4 million U.S. dollars nationwide, whereas in 1997 it was 238 million dollars. Despite over one billion dollars being spent on these projects, that is still less than one percent of the available funding for two modes of transportation (bicycling and walking) that account for about 6 percent of all trips. Transportation trips made by mass transit account for only 1.8 percent of all trips yet their share of funding received is much greater.

4.3 Increasing State, Regional, and Local Efforts

Funding using State and other more local funding sources have shown a similar increase for bicycle projects and programs. As was previously mentioned, each State DOT has a bicycle/pedestrian coordinator who oversees all State activities relating to bicycling. Similarly,

nearly one hundred U.S. cities have established the position of a bicycle (and sometime pedestrian) coordinator to oversee local efforts.

4.4 Increasing local grassroots support

At the same time that governmental efforts at all levels have increased, the level of grassroots initiative has also skyrocketed. In essence, both the governmental and the advocacy efforts are responses to the same pressure from the U.S. public for more opportunities to bicycle for transportation (and recreation) purposes.

5. The Challenges

Even with the changes reported there are still a number of significant challenges remaining before the U.S. transportation system is a more truly balanced intermodal system:

5.1 Resistance to Change

Modifying transportation planning, design, maintenance, and operations processes at all levels of government takes time. The shift has only really started since the early 1990's and while there are many success stories, there are many localities which change is still needed.

5.2 Flexibility and Delegated Decisionmaking

Both ISTEA and TEA-21 offered unprecedented flexibility and responsibility for funding decisions to State, regional, and local governments. A byproduct of this flexibility is an unevenness in responses by these localities. It can be said, nevertheless, that the Federal legislation and the response to it has raised the level of response for bicycle projects nationwide. Where the initial receptivity was low, it is a little higher now. Where the initial receptivity was higher, it is even greater now.

5.3 Measuring the Amount of Bicycling (and Walking)

The U.S. does not have good estimates of the amount of bicycling and walking at a national level. In fact, most States and localities do not count the number of bicyclists using the transportation system. Incentives for encouraging the collection of bicycle use data must be found.

5.4 Measuring Safety for Nonmotorized Motor Vehicle Crashes

U.S. data is reasonably available for crashes between bicyclists and motor vehicles. The quality of that data could be improved. However, the real deficiency in U.S. bicycle crash data systems is in the collection of information on crashes not involving motor vehicles. Data from sources such as hospital emergency rooms must be accumulated to get a true picture of the size and nature of bicycle crashes that are "single vehicle" crashes such as running off the road or pathway.

5.5 Need for Training and Technical Assistance

As more funding is being devoted to bicycle projects, there is a corresponding rise in the need to train transportation officials in providing appropriate programs and facilities for bicyclists. Similarly, the need for providing technical assistance has risen as well.

6. Conclusions or Lessons Learned

Changing the U.S. transportation system from one dominated by a single mode of transportation (the private automobile) to a more balanced intermodal system takes time. The U.S. is still in the midst of this change with varying degrees of success in different localities. Secondly, the

U.S. DOT has provided a leadership role in encouraging States and localities to modify the nature of the U.S. transportation system. However, the role is one of encouragement and not one of mandates, requirements, and sanctions for nonperformance. Thirdly, since the Federal transportation legislation encourages flexibility and delegates decisionmaking to State and more local governmental agencies, the results have been uneven. Finally, even though there has been strong encouragement for change from the national level of government and from local advocacy demands, the change must occur in the middle as well. Changing how

transportation agencies operate takes time, patience, persistence, and hard work. The process has begun, but is far from complete. It will be complete when the inclusion of the needs of bicyclists are weighed equitably with those of motor vehicles, and the U.S. Transportation System truly becomes intermodal and more balanced for all users.