

# TRANSPORTATION PLANNING REVIEW GUIDELINES

For the

Regional Planning Affiliation (RPA)

Region 7

February 25, 2003

## **OVERVIEW**

*Location.* The Iowa Northland Regional Transportation Authority (INRTA) encompasses the counties of Bremer, Butler, Grundy, Chickasaw, Buchanan and the non-MPO portion of Black Hawk County. In addition, several communities within each county are involved in the INRTA process. A map delineating the INRTA service area is attached.

*Demography.* The counties that comprise the INRTA combined for a 2000 population of 213,199 which reflects a 2.2 percent increase over 1990. Prior to the economic recession of the 1980s, the population in the six-county region peaked at 233,520 according to the 1980 census. However, the economic downturn in the early and mid 1980s forced many people to migrate out of the area to search for employment. At present, the estimated population served by the INRTA, excluding the metropolitan area of Black Hawk County, is 97,497.

According to the 2000 Census, the median age for Iowa is 36.6. In the INRTA, all but Black Hawk County exceed the state average, with Butler County and Grundy County having the highest median age 41.3 and 40.8 respectively. Like many Iowa counties and communities, each of the INRTA's counties have a relatively high population of persons over age 65. Further study of the demographics of the region may result in a change in policy and programming decisions as they relate to transportation improvements in the region.

Excluding the Black Hawk County metropolitan area, the INRTA is comprised of persons of homogeneous racial backgrounds, with nearly 98.5 percent of the population in the remaining counties being white, according to the 2000 Census.

*Economy.* Median household income in the six-county region has witnessed between a 45 percent to 62 percent increase from 1990 to 2000. As reflected in the 2000 Census, Butler has the lowest median household income at \$35,883.00 while Bremer County enjoys the highest median household income at \$40,826.

## **TRANSPORTATION ISSUES**

*Highway:* There are several major highways that traverse the six-county region. In addition, recent and or planned improvements include the completion of US 218 (Avenue of the Saints) to the north; and, the extension of a four-lane US 20 west to connect to Interstate 35. Both are scheduled for completion in 2003. In terms of other primary highway initiatives, the following have been identified as the most pressing need in the region:

- Completion of the capacity improvements to US Highway 63 from IA 3 to just south of IA 346. Said improvements were removed from the Iowa DOT's five year program in 2001. With the recent opening of the New Hampton bypass, an increase of traffic on this roadway is expected, with a very high percentage of trucks (in excess of 25 percent).
- Study of the Highway 150 corridor from U.S. Highway 20 to IA Highway 3 north of Oelwein.
- A study of the U.S. Highway 218 corridor between Cedar Falls and Waverly. This study would likely focus on several aspects impacting the corridor including safety, land use and access management issues.

In addition to these major improvements/studies, there are several other projects and issues that face the INRTA. For example, adequate funding to maintain the current infrastructure at the county level. Of key concern is the number of bridges in the six-county region and the inability to meet the needed replacement or rehabilitation of these bridges due to funding. Like many other counties in Iowa, the impact of larger, heavier agricultural related equipment on these bridges is significant. Though all six counties in the INRTA are to be commended for being efficient with their bridge funds, it seems they are fighting an uphill battle.

*Transit:* Public transit in the INRTA's six county region is provided by the Iowa Northland Regional Transit Commission (RTC), which is a division of the Iowa Northland Regional Council of Governments. The RTC operates ADA accessible buses for Head Start students, persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and the general public. Service is provided in Waverly and Independence on a demand response basis and also offers service from Shell Rock and Janesville to Waverly. In addition, RTC contracts with other area agencies to provide transportation in the six county region such as Exceptional Persons, Inc., Tri-County Head start, and area school districts.

There are several issues that face the RTC in terms of their ability to provide quality, efficient transit service. Of paramount concern is the significant reduction in State Transit Assistance. This reduction has forced the RTC to restructure their fee schedule, passing the loss in revenue to the customer, or a reduction much needed service. Also, the RTC is faced with a changing demographic, with an older more mobile population. Careful study of this changing demographic is essential if the RTC is to remain viable as a transportation alternative.

## **RPA ORGANIZATION AND COOPERATING AGENCIES**

### *1. Please discuss the organizational structure of the RPA?*

The INRTA by-laws provide for the chief-elected official of each jurisdiction on the Board (or their designee) on voting matters and appointed representatives on the Technical Committee. The voting membership of the INRTA includes a member of the Board of Supervisors or other elected official designee, for Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Butler, Chickasaw, and Grundy Counties, a mayor or council member or other elected official designee from two cities in each county as determined by a convention of cities in that county and in lieu of a convention, two cities are

selected by the County Board of Supervisors. To ensure representation for the region's small urban areas, one representative from Bremer County shall represent the City of Waverly and one representative from Buchanan County shall represent the City of Independence. Non-voting, ex-officio members include a representative from INRCOG, the Iowa DOT, the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration.

In addition to the Policy Board, the INRTA has a standing Technical Committee and a standing Enhancement Committee. Both Committees consist of engineering, public works and in the case of the Enhancement Committee, county conservation staff as well as other cultural representatives. The Director of the Regional Transit Commission is also a member of the Technical Committee.

*2. Is there a formal agreement between the RPA and the Iowa DOT regarding each other's roles and responsibilities?*

Each year the INRTA and the Iowa DOT enter into a planning agreement, which identifies available funding as well as the roles and responsibilities of each organization.

*3. How often does the RPA meet?*

Since the inception of the INRTA in 1993, we have made every effort to meet once a month. There are isolated months where agenda items do not warrant a meeting, however, on the average we meet nine to ten times per year. Excluding the February meeting, the Policy Board and Technical Committee meet jointly. In February, we meet only with the Enhancement Committee and the Technical Committee to develop the annual Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

*4. How is the RPA funded? What are the funding sources (STP, FTA, etc) and funding amounts? When and how are the funds made available.*

Planning activities for the INRTA are provided via a combination of regional STP funds, FTA funds and the required local match. For FY 03, the INRTA received \$18,000.00 in STP funds, \$13,807.00 in FTA funds and \$7,952.00 in local match. The local match is provided from membership dues paid to INRCOG. All funding is identified in the Transportation Planning Work Program, and are reimbursed by the Iowa DOT on a quarterly basis.

#### UNIFIED PLANNING WORK PROGRAM (UPWP)

*5. Is there an annual work program for the RPA? What type of activities are chosen and how are they prioritized?*

A Unified Planning Work Program is prepared and approved by the INRTA each year. The initial document is approved in March for submittal and review by the Iowa DOT. Once comments are received, a final UPWP is prepared and approved in June of each year. The UPWP identifies funding sources and breaks the program down by specific tasks to be completed in that fiscal year. Development of the UPWP is performed by staff with assistance from the Technical Committee and Policy Board. All members are asked to identify potential work activities that they would like included in a specific program. Work activities cover a broad range of issues, from the day to day administration of the INRTA to involvement in larger scale traffic studies.

## **TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (TIP)**

6. *What is the process for TIP development? How is the TIP prioritized (i.e., is the TIP prioritized regionally, or is it county by county)?*

The TIP is developed by the INRTA Transportation Policy Board and INRCOG staff through consultation with the public after participating jurisdictions submit individual projects. Upon receipt of candidate projects from participating jurisdictions, the projects are reviewed with the Technical Committee who makes programming recommendations to the Policy Board. For Enhancement type projects, the Enhancement Committee makes a programming recommendation to the Technical Committee.

Priorities are developed according to federal aid eligibility, existing infrastructure needs, system continuity, and its compatibility with the goals set forth in the long-range plan and as established in the TIP. Issues such as safety, condition of pavement and volume of traffic are considered, though no formal scoring process is used. Overall, projects are prioritized on a regional basis. The INRTA makes a concerted effort to not sub allocate funds on a county by county basis.

7. *Are funding targets provided by the Iowa DOT?*

Yes, funding targets are provided in January, which accommodates our TIP schedule.

8. *Please describe how the TIP/STIP process works? Does the process work well in your opinion? Should the process be changed?*

Though the TIP and STIP process can be cumbersome, it has greatly improved over the past few years. This improvement is a result of better communication between INRCOG staff and the jurisdictions and between INRCOG staff and the Iowa DOT. The Iowa DOT has provided more information i.e., quarterly STP and Enhancement reports that has aided the process. This year, the INRTA is one of several regions to be participating in the TPMS process as developed by the Iowa County Engineers Association. The TPMS has the potential to streamline the programming process and assist with tracking projects once they are in the program.

Overall, the TIP and STIP process works and we would not recommend large scale changes.

9. *Does the RPA conduct any sort of check on project status throughout the year or when the TIP/STIP is developed?*

Each INRTA meeting agenda includes a project status report. This gives those in attendance the opportunity to provide updates on projects that are in the program, which enables staff to identify projects that may need to be moved in the program. Also, during the TIP process we ask each jurisdiction to fill out a project form for each project candidate and those that were in the second and third year of last years program. Again, this provides each jurisdiction with the opportunity to change those outlying year projects in the upcoming program, if necessary.

*10. How is the programming of rural transit projects handled by the RPA?*

Having the RTC housed in the same office is a benefit in terms of programming transit projects. Each year, the Director of Transit provides us with the RTC capital improvements program, which identifies the federal aid projects. They are then incorporated into the TIP.

*11. How are enhancement projects programmed and monitored by the RPA?*

Please refer to the response to question 6 and 9.

**TRANSPORTATION PLAN:**

*12. Is there a regional long range transportation plan? Who reviews or approves it?*

The current long range transportation plan was developed in 1994 and includes planning elements for the region as well as the metro area. Since that time a separate plan has been developed by the MPO. Development of a separate long range transportation plan for the region will take place this year and next, utilizing the guidelines provided by the Iowa DOT.

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN:**

*13. What type of public involvement activities are carried out? Any approved public involvement plan?*

All regular meetings of the INRTA are open to the public, with proper notification of meeting agendas advertised in various media outlets in the region. During the TIP process, a public input meeting is held prior to approval of the program, to solicit public comment. A minimum of one public input session is held. Two years ago, we held a series of public input meetings relating to the TIP at four venues in the region. However, due to poor attendance at all of the meetings, it did not seem to be an efficient use of funds and that practice has been discontinued. We anticipate a significant amount of public involvement as part of the regional transportation plan process.

The INRTA has had an approved Public Involvement Plan since 1995.

**OTHER ISSUES:**

*14. Are there opportunities for coordination with other RPAs and MPOs?*

From time to time we share information with our counterparts at the regional and metropolitan level. The best opportunity for sharing ideas is at the RPA and MPO quarterly meetings held in Ames. Those are very beneficial and we strongly recommend that they continue.

*15. What guidance has been received from the Iowa DOT and/or District Planner or from other state/federal agencies? Is additional guidance or training needed from these agencies? If so, in what specific area?*

Each of these agencies continue to be a valuable asset in terms of guidance and training. Specifically, the guidance provided by the Iowa DOT relating to development of the long range transportation plan is very important. In addition, the Iowa DOT's District Planner is an active member of the INRTA's planning process and serves as a good liaison between the Iowa DOT and the region.

Also, INRCOG has made a substantial investment in developing GIS related services, which are an invaluable tool in our transportation planning activities. Information and technical assistance provided by the Iowa DOT, CTRE and federal agencies has and will continue to enhance our Transportation GIS activities. The availability of data, aerial photos and other information via the internet allows us to incorporate this type of information into the transportation decision making process in a very cost effective manner.

Additional training and guidance is always a must. Specific areas may include GIS, small urban and regional travel demand modeling, incorporating safety into the planning and programming process and planning activities relating to security initiatives.

*16. Overall, how has the development of the RPAs improved the transportation planning process? What type of problems or issues have been encountered by the RPA? Any suggestions for improvement to the RPAs or the planning process?*

If nothing else, the RPA process has forced our six county region to look at the transportation network as a system, where improvements or lack of improvements impact the entire region. Certainly, what we do in Region 7 has a direct impact on other surrounding regions. Also, what happens in Bremer County has an impact on Black Hawk County, etc. This holistic approach to transportation planning has resulted in a more efficient and safe system.

Also, as a result of ISTEA and TEA-21, the counties and cities have started looking "outside the box" in terms of transportation solutions. In addition, they now realize the importance of other modes of transportation and the benefit including them in the planning process.

The problems faced by the INRTA were no different than other regions. The reluctance to buy into the regional concept, versus the county concept was difficult and still presents problems from time to time. However, it appears that the INRTA has realized the benefit of the regional concept and continues to support the process.

*17. Please describe recent "success stories" experienced by the RPA?*

Perhaps our biggest success story involved the short lived Highway 150 study in Buchanan and Fayette County. This involved a corridor study from U.S. 20 in Independence to IA 3 in Oelwein and encompassed both the INRTA and Upper Exploreland. Realizing the importance of this study, both agencies programmed a portion of their regional STP funds toward the study. Upper Exploreland programmed a portion of their funds for that part of the study in Buchanan County

and the INRTA programmed funds for a future continuation of the study in Fayette County. The programming of precious STP monies in another region is unprecedented, yet both saw the benefits in doing so. Unfortunately, the study was halted due to a shortage of funding at the state level. Yet, this project exhibited the kind of cooperation that is needed in today's transportation planning environment.

Yet another success story involves development of the INRTA's Trail Plan (see attached). Developed in the mid 90's, this plan serves as the catalyst for the implementation of trails both off-road and on-road throughout the region. To date, over 60 miles of trail have been constructed, with over 200 additional miles planned. The Trail Plan has led to the establishment of multi-jurisdictional partnerships in several counties and cities. Various trail groups and partnerships have been formed in Buchanan County, the City of Waverly, New Hampton as well as Chickasaw and Butler County. Each of these groups are involved in trail planning and trail implementation within their respective area.

*Any additional comments or questions?*

Not at this time.