

## **Nation needs Rutgers' transportation expertise**

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Rutgers University has embraced the state's stereotype; it announced last week that it would seek to become a leader in transportation research and teaching.

This is welcome news, not only because New Jersey's roads and highways are crowded with cars, and not only because the state is lagging behind in maintaining its infrastructure, but also because there are signs that the university can excel in the field. The news is welcome also because the nation as a whole so desperately needs more and better information about its transportation system, and the costs and benefits of the public policies that shape it.

The university, which has transportation professors at two different institutes -- Rutgers' Center for Advanced Infrastructure and Transportation (CAIT) in Piscataway and the Voorhees Center in the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy in New Brunswick -- already has areas of recognized expertise.

The Voorhees Center has trained transit workers on how to recognize potential terrorist activity; it also was asked to train workers at both the Democratic and Republican conventions, and to provide literature to officials in Athens, Greece, as they prepared for the Olympic Games now under way. CAIT is designing sensors that monitor the condition of bridges and tunnels, as well as driving conditions for commuters. The plan is to continue building on those strengths and to use the talents of professors from several other disciplines, including business, urban planning, mathematics and demographics, to eventually make Rutgers, according to its executive vice president for academic affairs, "the transportation university."

Of course, leadership in a discipline as crucial to the safety, economy and environment of the country as transportation brings with it commensurate responsibility. The state is at a crisis point; its transportation trust fund is out of money and state politicians have been unable to summon the political courage to take necessary steps to correct the problem. And its transit system, while admirable in relation to many, has shortfalls that also need investment in order to make it safer, more convenient, and more attractive to travelers. The university already has advised the state on its many and diverse transportation issues, and it certainly needs to continue in that vein.

The nation as a whole also continues to coast with what is in many ways an outdated transportation policy. Despite the environmental and political costs of crude oil, the nation has yet to develop real alternatives to it as a fuel source, even as the sizes of its automobiles balloon. The subject of alternative fuel seems to attract the attention of policy makers only when the supply of petroleum is threatened. And public transportation continues to play a sorry second fiddle to the car culture.

In this respect, at least, Rutgers has the chance to diversify and balance the conversation. The other leading transportation universities in the country are located in Texas and California, two states where public transportation is anathema. Rutgers professors, especially at the Bloustein School, have shown a willingness at times to stand up to the prevailing notion of how transportation ought to work. They need to continue that push.

There is a double-edged sword. In order to increase their visibility, university officials acknowledge that they will have to seek more partnerships with agencies of the federal government. They say they already have reached out to The Homeland Security Department, as well as to the Transportation Department and the Federal Aviation Administration. Partnerships with these agencies will bring the university visibility and increase the chance that it will shape transportation policy. But the university will have to be sure it retains its independence. There's nothing worse than academics that facilitate bad policy.

Make no mistake about it. There is much to cheer about, especially the hope that while embracing the state's stereotype, it can help to overturn it.