



TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD

Dr. Rolf R. Schmitt Recipient of the 2024 Robert E. Skinner, Jr. Award



Dr. Rolf R. Schmitt, Deputy Director, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, U.S. Department of Transportation, is the 2024 recipient of the Robert E. Skinner, Jr. Distinguished Transportation Research Management Award for a 4-decade career devoted to conceiving, designing, establishing, sustaining, and managing a transportation statistical programs and a national library critical to fostering nation's transportation research community and the advancement of transportation knowledge, practice, and processes.

The Transportation Research Board's (TRB) Executive Committee established the Robert E. Skinner, Jr. Distinguished Transportation Research Management Award to recognize outstanding achievement in management, administration, promotion, fostering, and implementation of transportation research. The award honors Robert E. Skinner, Jr. who served TRB for more than 30 years, including 21 years as its executive director from 1994 to 2015.

The award will be presented on Wednesday, January 8, 2025, during the Chair's Plenary Session portion of the TRB Annual Meeting, January 5-9, 2025, at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C.

Rolf Richard Schmitt is the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) at the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). He helped launch BTS over 30 years ago, focusing on building quality data covering all forms of freight and passenger transportation and making information available for research, planning, and policymaking. Before his first tour in BTS, he worked for the Federal Highway Administration in the Office of Policy and subsequently in the Office of Operations between his first tour and being named the BTS Deputy Director.

A seminal moment in Dr. Schmitt's career came in 1989 when he joined the USDOT National Transportation Policy Working Group formed by Secretary of Transportation Sam Skinner and led by FHWA Administrator Tom Larson to produce *Moving America, A Statement of National Transportation Policy: Strategies for Action* (NTP) which was signed by President George H. W. Bush and issued at the White House in February 1990. As part of the NTP working group, Dr. Schmitt brought together his knowledge of transportation policy, economics, planning technology, research, and data issues. Through his leadership, the NTP recognized the importance for USDOT to improve the availability of data and the organizational capacity to compile and share transportation data.

Dr. Schmitt helped to develop the concept that led to creating a statistical agency within

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USDOT, which was incorporated in the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), a milestone in the history of U.S. surface transportation policy as well as in the development of more effective federal transportation data. ISTEA called for establishment of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), an independent statistical agency within USDOT, to coordinate data efforts to support informed operations and policy. Mr. Schmitt among the first USDOT employees recruited to BTS and became an Associate Director.

Though his career, he has championed the mission of creating and making available robust, reliable, up-to-date data that can be used to inform planning, investment and policy decisions and support positive outcomes to meet public purposes. His commitment to quality data and research has been the foundation for the creation and growth of BTS. Under his leadership, BTS has introduced many new and innovative products across the full range of transportation modes and topics, including surveys, regular reports, maps, and analytical tools for using data. The agency has also increased the span of data available, including geographic and geocoded data, and new methods of sorting and displaying information graphically.

From the creation of BTS, Dr. Schmitt has been part of formulating the plans for the structure, management and staffing of the agency, developing partnerships with other agencies across the federal, state, and local government, and structuring the agency's communications and data sharing strategies. He helped expand the agency's mandate in 1998 to include creation of the National Transportation Library, a home for thousands of transportation research documents that are available for download to the public.

Dr. Schmitt helped to establish and maintain the North American Transportation Statistical (NATS) interchange with the federal transportation and statistical agencies in Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Through his commitment to expanding access and usefulness of data, he helped formulate and support a break-through product created through the NATS interchange, a statistical compendium available in three languages--Spanish, English and French--using units of measure that were familiar in each of the three participating countries. With his strategic leadership, BTS and its partners in NATS have widened the scope of their exchange to include environmental challenges, sustainability, and resilience in dealing with issues related to climate change.

Dr. Schmitt serves on the Federal Committee on Statistical Methods and has worked closely with the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and representatives of the other federal statistical agencies on government-wide statistical policies through the Interagency Committee on Statistical Policy. He has worked with the Transportation Research Forum, the American Society of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and other groups outside government to advance the quality and awareness and use of statistics in transportation.

Dr. Schmitt began his volunteer service with TRB in 1980 when he became a member of the Standing Technical Committee on Transportation Information Systems and Data

Requirements. Since that time, Dr. Schmitt has served as chair, officer, member, or liaison to more than 25 TRB committees, task forces, and panels. He is an emeritus member of the Standing Technical Committees on Freight Transportation Data and of the former Committee on Transportation History that is now part of the Transportation and Society Section. As the USDOT liaison, he participated in the work of the committee that produced TRB's Special Report 234, *Data for Decisions: Requirements for National Transportation Policy Making* (1992) that examined data requirements necessary to support strategic transportation policy making and the institutional changes necessary to make those data available on a permanent basis.

Not including the traffic counts he did at the age of 8 for his mother, a planner in St. Louis, Dr. Schmitt's professional career in transportation began when he was a planning assistant for the State of Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration. His federal career started with the National Transportation Policy Study Commission in 1977. Dr. Schmitt received his B.A. in geography from California State University, Los Angeles and his Ph.D. in geography and environmental engineering from Johns Hopkins University.