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## North American Transit and Transportation Press Association

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## North American Transit and Transportation Press Association

Don Stacom, M.A.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2014

Advisor: John Bender

In early 2014, at least 10 U.S.-based, topic-centered professional organizations existed for journalists covering specialty beats. Religion, education, health care, science, environment, business, military, California statehouse, criminal justice and even food writers had their own associations.

No such organization existed for journalists covering transportation, however.

That changed in May with the creation of the North American Transit and Transportation Press Association, an organization exclusively for professional transportation journalists working in the United States and Canada.

Established with the guidance of faculty at the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, NATTPA is intended to promote a confidential exchange of information, leads and story ideas between transportation reporters. It also encourages professional networking and potentially can become a foundation for cooperative regional reporting ventures across state or even national boundaries.

NATTPA maintains a password-restricted set of message boards for members, and in December will introduce a roughly 1,000-entry searchable database of transportation resources.

The association began with an individual founder, and through an extensive recruitment campaign grew by November of 2014 to include 63 journalists representing news organizations in 30 states and four provinces. The goals for 2015 are to establish a board of directors with bylaws, operating procedures and a succession system for maintaining the website and database; to expand the transportation resource library and customized search engines; and to increase membership.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The value of Prof. John Bender's wisdom and insightful guidance in this project cannot be overstated. He along with Prof. Mary Kay Quinlan and Prof. Bruce Thorson graciously provided advice and patience as my committee.

Reporters Chuck Laszewski, Walt Bogdanich and Robert Cribb; the staff of the Don L. Love Memorial Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Steve Batt of the Homer Babbidge Library at the University of Connecticut all gave generously of their time and expertise. The founding members of NATTPA have made this project rewarding; their eagerness to participate suggests NATTPA will serve transportation journalists for many years.

In addition to all of the day-to-day sacrifices that she has made to accommodate my graduate education, Jeanne Leblanc – my wife – worked tirelessly to design a magnificent website and build the structure for the NATTPA database. Her technical skills were immensely valuable; her support and boundless encouragement were essential.

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## ORIGIN OF NATTPA

In 2009, the federal government offered more than \$8 billion to help states across the country build high-speed passenger rail lines.<sup>i</sup> In competition for a share of the money, 24 states put forward a total of 45 pitches requesting a combined \$50 billion.<sup>ii</sup>

The broad concept of running Japanese-style bullet trains at 220 mph – or even regular Amtrak service at 110 mph - in regions across the United States was genuinely revolutionary, but the intricate details were overwhelming in scope and quantity. Journalists struggled to comprehend just the proposals in their own territories, and none managed to produce a compelling, comprehensive account of the “big picture” - the entire network of plans that theoretically could transform inter-city transportation in America.

Washington Monthly<sup>iii</sup> and Time<sup>iv</sup> attempted some of the first detailed takeout pieces in 2011, Mass Transit<sup>v</sup> published an update in 2013 and The New York Times<sup>vi</sup> examined the status of the original high-speed rail concept in August of 2014 – all four focused on the high-profile proposals from California, the Northeast and elsewhere, but didn't address why so many lesser-known proposals had fallen by the wayside since 2009.

There still has been no comprehensive analysis to answer questions about the beneath-the-surface action: Which political alliances and business influences on Capitol Hill affected the fates of those 45 applications? Did national transportation consultants and

grants-writers cash in on the states' hunger for funding? Did the simultaneous demand by 24 states for complex technical guidance drive up the contract rates of the country's small pool of high-speed rail engineers and designers? Which constituencies in each region lined up behind high-speed rail and which opposed it, and did airlines or powerful freight rail companies spend lobbying money on this matter?

As one of the reporters in the middle of this, I experienced firsthand the frustration of watching this enormous initiative move forward without the in-depth reporting it deserved. The primary factor in this was the crippling newsroom reductions of the past two decades; staffing was down steeply in Washington bureaus<sup>vii</sup>, in statehouses<sup>viii</sup> and on investigative teams.<sup>ix</sup> Specialty beats such as transportation had been cut severely, as was seen when the initial NATTPA recruitment effort in 2014 determined that fewer than 50 mainstream media sources in the U.S. and Canada maintained full-time transportation beats. But a crucial secondary concern was the lack of any system empowering the remaining journalists to share their information, insights and questions with each other.

This second factor is what NATTPA is designed to address.

Work to formulate the NATTPA plan began in 2009 and continued through the start of 2014 with:

- Research to ensure no similar organization exists by talking with leaders at Investigative Reporters and Editors and at the Society of Professional Journalists, reviewing past IRE and SPJ national conference programs, consulting the listings maintained by the Council of National Journalism Organizations, and performing Lexis/Nexis and Google search using keyword combinations of transit, transportation, reporters, writers, journalists, organization and association;

- Conversations with representatives from the Association of Health Care Journalists and the Education Writers Association at journalism conferences to hear about the operations of their organizations;
- Phone conversations with members of the semi-defunct Capitolbeat association of statehouse reporters to determine why their organization went dormant in 2011;
- In-depth discussions with retired St. Paul Pioneer Press transportation reporter Chuck Laszewski, New York Times reporter Walt Bogdanich and Toronto Star reporter Robert Cribb to fine-tune the NATTPA concept.

#### CREATION OF NATTPA

In early 2014, Pew Research’s directory of journalism organizations<sup>x</sup> listed seven designed for journalists in specific beats: The American Society of Business Publication Editors, the Association of Health Care Journalists, Capitol Correspondents Association of California, the Education Writers Association, the National Association of Science Writers, the Religion Newswriters Association and the Society of Environmental Journalists.

The Council of National Journalism Organizations<sup>xi</sup> added Military Reporters & Editors, Criminal Justice Journalists and the Association of Food Journalists.

By comparison, journalists covering mass transit and interstate transportation – from airlines, bus systems and freight haulers to subways, trains and ferries – did so without an umbrella association providing guidance, information and mutual resources. The plan for

NATTPA was to create such an organization; because of the profoundly regional nature of passenger and freight transportation, Canada was included as well. Language barriers prevent a recruitment drive in Mexico at this point.

Few if any journalists can be fully conversant with all transportation trends; the emergence of fuel cell buses, the decline of rural airports, the rise of BRT (bus rapid transit), the Canadian effort to strengthen rail safety in the wake of Lac Megantic and the renewed popularity of streetcar systems are just some developments under way today. NATTRA's appeal is the offer of relevant background material and contacts, free of the ideological and political motives that accompany the advocacy messages we're already deluged by. To facilitate frank discussions and a climate of camaraderie, membership is limited to professional mainstream journalists. (A task for the future board of directors will be to define this). All NATTPA message boards, the database and library are behind a firewall.

With those principles in mind, U.S. mail and email was sent in 2013 to about 30 transportation reporters from major U.S. daily newspapers. The messages outlined the NATTPA concept, inquired about the level of interest in joining and invited offers to serve on the initial board of directors. Several reporters encouraged the project, and two asked to be contacted at the next step: Transportation reporters who were then with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the Boston Globe.

In early 2014, [www.50states.com/news](http://www.50states.com/news), [www.mondotimes.com](http://www.mondotimes.com) and [www.newspaperscanada.ca](http://www.newspaperscanada.ca) were searched to get websites for daily newspapers with circulations above 50,000. Smaller papers were sought out in sparsely developed states

and provinces, and in states with a high concentration of public transit systems (such as Pennsylvania and New York).

Each of roughly 350 websites was searched for staff directories and/or recent transportation stories to indicate whether the newsroom had a reporter covering transportation. In the overwhelming majority, no such job title or specialty was listed, so editors or newsroom managers were phoned to determine which staff member – if any – would be appropriate to contact. The original list of news outlets was cut by about 90 because some no longer existed, editors at others were skeptical about the idea or uncooperative, and editors at many reported that they randomly assigned transportation stories to any available and thus had nobody to recommend. This yielded a list of approximately 260 prospective NATTPA members in the United States and Canada.

(Very few newsrooms maintain a dedicated, full-time transportation reporting position. Typically the work falls to one or two reporters who have different primary assignments but also gravitate to transportation; these are a primary audience for NATTPA).

Lexis/Nexis and Google were employed in a substantially less intensive search for magazines, TV stations, radio stations and general news websites; extremely few have reporters covering transportation, but in all about 20 prospects were identified and contacted.

Weblanc, the web design company owned by Jeanne Leblanc (wife of Don Stacom), was retained to set up an @nattpa.org email account, establish the [www.nattpa.org](http://www.nattpa.org) website, create a series of forum folders and message boards, and build a searchable database for transportation resources. Weblanc also provided technical guidance on

generating three customized Google search engines that currently are the chief resources in the “Library” section of the website. All programming and other technological work involved in this project has been provided by Weblanc.

## MEMBERSHIP OF NATTPA

Hard copies of the NATTPA promotional brochure (Appendix A) were sent to roughly 250 prospective members in the spring and summer of 2014, along with emails and a phone campaign explaining the organization and inviting participation. One element of NATTPA is free membership, and anecdotal evidence from phone conversations indicates this is profoundly popular. Roughly a half dozen editors and reporters offered comments that no training or membership budgets exist.

Also in June of 2014, copies of the brochure were distributed in San Francisco at the Investigative Reporters and Editors annual convention.

The goal for 2014 was to get 40 to 50 journalists to join, primarily because discussion boards typically require a substantial base of participants to work. In the case of NATTPA, the terms of service (Appendix B) are designed to overcome barriers to participation: Fear that expression of personal opinion would be used against posters, suspicion that competitors would mine postings for competitive advantage, and concern that political or advocacy groups could access NATTPA information for their media contact lists.

For categorizing members, the country was divided geographically into six regions: Northeast, North Central, Southeast, South Central, Northwest and Southwest. Given the

relatively small number of Canadian prospects, all Canadian members are considered in the seventh region, Canada. These regions may be used for allocation of representatives when a board of directors is established in 2015.

As of mid-November 2014, membership stands at 63 (Appendix C). Members represent 30 states and four provinces. As expected, the vast majority – 56 – are employed by newspapers; four work for magazines, one for radio, one for television and one for a news website.

### WEBSITE OF NATTPA

The [www.nattpa.org](http://www.nattpa.org) page includes a brief public introduction and a registration link, but accessing all material beyond that point requires a username and password. (All membership requests are forwarded to Don Stacom to validate, so same-day registration is generally unavailable).

Interior pages include a membership list with phone and email contact information to facilitate one-on-one, direct communication between members. It is anticipated that a large part of NATTPA's service will be to give reporters easy access to reach colleagues directly with story ideas or collaborative projects. Having those conversations one-on-one and offsite will keep competitors from learning of the story ideas or sources, and will offer immediacy – especially with breaking news.

Interior pages also include message boards (Appendix D) divided into subjects and subcategories, such as “Aviation” with the subcategories of “Air freight,” “Airlines” and “Airports and FAA.” This is intended to foster dialogue by letting members get directly

to the topic that concerns them, while skipping material they don't cover. (For instance, most news markets have no ports, ferries, subways or light rail, and some have no highway tolls, passenger trains or nearby airports. In a few cases, two reporters share parts of the beat, and thus seek less information about some modes of transportation).

The Library section is likely to be expanded in 2015; for now, it includes three Google customized search engines that give reporters the ability to limit searches to 52 U.S. transportation departments (the 50 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia), or to all U.S. federal agencies involved in transportation, or to Canadian federal and provincial agencies involved in transportation.

#### DATABASE OF NATTPA

The association in the winter of 2014-15 will post a database of slightly more than 1,000 transportation resources in the United States and Canada.

It is in no way intended to be comprehensive, and instead is envisioned as frequently changing and expanding in the years ahead. Members will be advised of caveats: The database is intended merely as a starting point for research, its information will in some cases need updating almost immediately, and nearly all data is taken directly from the websites of each agency, business, publication or association. In the cases of major airports, airlines, railroads, trucking companies and maritime shippers, independent figures – largely from government agencies - have been provided to give rankings by annual volume of business.

Nevertheless, the database provides a unique collection of information searchable by

state, province and transportation mode. Entries cover resources ranging from transit systems, pilots unions, toll roads, ferry systems, maritime trade journals, light rail advocacy groups, statewide trucking associations and more.

No more than 5 percent of the current database is crowd-sourced, but that figure should rise in 2015. NATTPA members are asked when joining to complete a questionnaire (Appendix E) listing the top businesses, government agencies and other entities in their area; as of mid-November about half of the responses received have been processed, and roughly half of the membership has sent replies.

At least 95 percent of the database is from extensive Web research done between July and mid-November of 2014. Researched and listed were:

- State legislative bodies with jurisdiction over transportation;
- State, federal and provincial government agencies dealing with transportation;
- Class I and Class II railroads (as listed by the U.S. Federal Railroad Administration);
- The 10 busiest Canadian airports by passenger volume in 2012 as listed by Statistics Canada;
- The 20 busiest U.S. and Canadian seaports by containerized cargo traffic in 2011 as reported by the American Association of Port Authorities;
- The 25 busiest U.S. airports by passenger volume as reported by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics;
- The largest U.S. airlines by 2013-14 passenger volume as reported by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics;

- The 25 biggest U.S. and Canadian trucking companies as ranked by Transport Topics' 2013 "Top 100 For-Hire Carriers" listing;
- Approximately 30 of the largest Canadian transit agencies listed by the American Public Transportation Association;
- All U.S. transit agencies listed by the American Public Transportation Association as "Above 2 million boardings per year."

In addition, related transportation links from scores of state transportation departments, federal agencies, transportation businesses, trade associations, transit unions and advocacy groups were followed to additional sources.

## FUTURE OF NATTPA

This winter, the NATTPA database will be added to the site, along with a primer on transportation financing (Appendix F).

Approximately 10 NATTPA members have expressed at least some degree of interest in serving on a board of directors; creating that board will be the most important job for 2015. The goal is to establish a long-term leadership structure for the organization that will provide stability, draft a continuity plan and give representation to membership.

The plan is for the founding board to draft bylaws and operating procedures, along with a systematic assignment of duties for ongoing membership recruitment and retention, database expansion and updating, and message board supervision. Membership services may be the most demanding of these tasks; just between June and November, several members changed their contact information, one moved to a different newspaper,

one left the industry altogether and about a half-dozen have required help with resetting passwords or other log-in details. In addition, the roughly 170-name list of remaining prospective will need to be contacted periodically and updated frequently.

The board will be given a recommendation to keep the association simple and to either retain the dues-free status or charge a nominal amount for web hosting costs. The top concern expressed by prospective board members is one of excessive time demands; this can be addressed if the association keeps its work strictly focused and avoids the temptations of mission creep. The tradeoff is that there would not be contests, awards ceremonies, conventions or similar amenities.

Ultimately, this is among the decisions that will rest with the board. Also to be decided is whether NATTPA continues restricting membership to professional, mainstream news reporters and editors, or opens its membership to bloggers, advocacy writers, publicists and others.

A third policy decision will be whether NATTPA expand its database and message boards to cover topics that are currently excluded for the sake of efficiency and mission focus. These include taxis and limousines, tour and charter buses, paratransit operators, transit museums and sightseeing rail lines, transportation publications and businesses operating in the U.S. and/or Canada but based overseas, cruise lines, water taxis, bikeshares, vanpools, warehouses and cargo terminals, Uber and Lyft.

Future initiatives could include adding Library resources such as the State Transportation Improvement Plans (long-term spending and service plans) of each state, a link to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics monthly updates on domestic cargo

shipping, and a sample of transit labor contracts and transit contractor contracts.

<sup>i</sup> Federal Railroad Administration, *High Speed Intercity Rail Funding by Region*. Retrieved Sept. 22, 2014 from U.S. Department of Transportation [www.fra.dot.gov/Page/P0554](http://www.fra.dot.gov/Page/P0554)

<sup>ii</sup> David Randall Peterman, et al., *The Development of High Speed Rail in the United States: Issues and Recent Events*, Congressional Research Service; Dec. 20, 2013. Retrieved Sept. 22, 2014 from Federation of American Scientists <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42584.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Phillip Longman, *The Case for Not-Quite-So-High-Speed Rail*, Washington Monthly; July /August 2011. Retrieved Sept. 24, 2014 from Washington Monthly [www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/julyaugust\\_2011/features/the\\_case\\_for\\_notquite\\_sohighsp030492.php?page=all](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/julyaugust_2011/features/the_case_for_notquite_sohighsp030492.php?page=all)

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Grunwald, *Obama's Big, Bold Bet on High-Speed Rail*, Time; Feb. 9, 2011. Retrieved Sept. 22, 2014 from Time <http://content.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,2047110,00.html>

<sup>v</sup> Francis Miller, *High-Speed Rail: The State of the Industry Three Years Later*, Mass Transit; Nov. 5, 2013. Retrieved Sept. 26, 2014 from Mass Transit [www.masstransitmag.com/blog/11147573/high-speed-rail-state-of-the-industry-three-years-later](http://www.masstransitmag.com/blog/11147573/high-speed-rail-state-of-the-industry-three-years-later)

<sup>vi</sup> Ron Nixon, \$11 Billion Later, High-Speed Rail is Inching Along, The New York Times; Aug, 6, 2014. Retrieved Sept. 26, 2014 from The New York Times [www.nytimes.com/2014/08/07/us/delays-persist-for-us-high-speed-rail.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/07/us/delays-persist-for-us-high-speed-rail.html?_r=0)

<sup>vii</sup> Jennifer Dorroh, *Endangered Species*, American Journalism Review; December/January 2009. Retrieved Nov. 4, 2014 from American Journalism Review <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4645>

<sup>viii</sup> Jennifer Dorroh, *Statehouse Exodus*, American Journalism Review; April/May 2009. Retrieved Nov. 4, 2014 from American Journalism Review <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4721>

<sup>ix</sup> Mary Walton, *Investigative Shortfall*, American Journalism Review: September 2010. Retrieved Nov. 4, 2014 from American Journalism Review <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4904>

<sup>x</sup> Pew Research, Journalism Organizations: 2014. Retrieved from March 15, 2014 from journalism.org <http://www.journalism.org/resources/journalism-organizations>

<sup>xi</sup> Council of National Journalism Organizations, Find a Group. Retrieved March 15, 2014 from Council of National Journalism Organizations [www.journalismassociations.com/find-a-group](http://www.journalismassociations.com/find-a-group)