



Wasatch Transportation Academy: Piloting an Investment in Community Capital

Nathan McNeil, MURP; Keith Bartholomew, Ph.D.

How can community members become more engaged in transportation decision making?

Individuals and groups can learn to effect powerful change, but success requires some familiarity with how civic processes work. Community Transportation Academies, or CTAs, provide a basic technical understanding of how a city or region's transportation system operates, along with the decision makers and decision-making processes that determine how the system is shaped.

Supported by the National Institute for Transportation and Communities (NITC), the new Wasatch Transportation Academy (WTA) at the University of Utah was piloted in 2022 in the Salt Lake City region. The research team developed a course vision, topics, and logistics for the WTA by interviewing stakeholders in the Utah Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, the Utah Department of Transportation, the Utah Transit Authority, Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City, and the Wasatch Front Regional Council.

Led by Nathan McNeil of Portland State University and Keith Bartholomew of the University of Utah, the WTA used the established Portland Traffic and Transportation class in Portland, Oregon as a framework.

As part of an earlier NITC project in 2015, McNeil had developed a Course Curriculum and Implementation Handbook based on the Portland class. Now the handbook has been updated to include lessons from the Wasatch course so that other cities and counties looking to start a transportation academy in their community can learn from those examples.

[Access the new Community Transportation Academy: Course Curriculum and Implementation Handbook here \(PDF\).](#)

FOSTERING A MORE INVOLVED COMMUNITY

Community transportation academies provide community members the knowledge and tools to get involved and help make the transportation system a reflection of their input and values.

"This is an investment in community capital [in the Salt Lake City region], and that's how we are thinking of it. Like most investments, the rewards are substantial, but they are built off of a long arc," Bartholomew said.

Thinking far into the future means there is no shortage of possibilities. Andrea Olson, Planning Director of the Utah Department of Transportation, encourages community members to become proactively involved in transportation projects in the early stages:

"As a resident, the earlier on you can get involved, the more influence you can have on what a transportation project looks like. The further you get along in the life of a project, the less opportunity there is for changing it. It can be hard to get people engaged in a 30-year planning process, but once they understand that's really where everything is on the table, that provides some motivation," Olson said.

Olson, who was an instructor in this year's WTA, says she hopes the course continues to grow in popularity. "I want to see people out at transportation meetings and open houses. One of the things I encouraged the course participants to do was, get on your planning commission or get elected, because that's a great way to really have some say in what's happening," she said.

In addition to instructing students on how transportation decision-making works behind the scenes, transportation academies let community members work on their own

transportation problems. The WTA included community-led project presentations and an in-person field trip of a local transportation project in the process of being implemented. Feedback showed a high degree of satisfaction, with around 40 percent of participants indicating that they were, or would be in the near future, more engaged in various transportation-related community activities after taking part in the academy.

“The biggest takeaway for me was the level of coordination between agencies that is required for these projects, especially when different agencies may have different goals or metrics for success. It was also helpful to learn that getting involved earlier in the planning process can have a greater impact on the final form a project takes on than just responding to plans that have been put out,” shared one WTA participant.

Ted Knowlton, deputy director of the Wasatch Front Regional Council, served as an advisor on the project and believes that increasing the number of advocates in the region is one key function of the academy. “

Advocacy punches above its weight – it’s way more effective than you would guess from the number of people involved. Those residents that are opinion leaders, that show up to public meetings, that volunteer on committees or what have you: When that component of the population is knowledgeable, it tends to elevate the quality of the dialogue and ultimately the quality of the outcomes in planning. Because they have a high level of knowledge, they’re pushing the state of the practice towards generally good ends,” Knowlton said.

As the WTA moves into its second year, we look forward to seeing the real-world impacts of projects in Utah. Bartholomew and McNeil [spoke about that hope on an April 2022 episode of The Brake, a Streetsblog USA podcast.](#)

REPLICATING THE TRANSPORTATION ACADEMY

The WTA course was held on Monday evenings for eight weeks during January-March 2022 ([view class recordings here](#)), reaching 49 community members. Taking notes from the locally-focused Portland course, the Utah team gave the Wasatch academy a broader regional focus. Using an online format facilitated this, as students could attend from anywhere.

“The curriculum handbook documents the structure of this sort of class and offers a set of potential topics that you could cover, along with some advice and wisdom from the places that have done it before. Drawing on the experiences of Portland and Salt Lake, it gives you the outline. You still have to do the work, and you still have to find the champions and

the supporters, but it is important to learn from those that have done it,” McNeil said.

The Course Curriculum and Implementation Handbook offers an overview of the key elements of a CTA, as well as class assignments that help participants develop an idea for a transportation improvement in their community. The handbook also includes:

- Feedback from previous course graduates;
- Guidance for practical items like establishing a budget, finding presenters, developing course materials and recruiting students;
- Detailed outlines for ten class sessions covering topics like transit planning, active transportation, how to be involved in decision-making, transportation equity, and the history of transportation in your city or area;
- Advice to get the ball rolling for a new academy. An important first step is finding a “champion,” someone willing to fight to get funding and rally leadership to support the class. Other key operating principles include recruiting top agency staff to participate, building an advisory network, fostering communication between community members and agency staff, and establishing a neutral setting for the course, such as a university or community center.

“The WTA is going to be more fully integrated as part of the master’s curriculum here at the University of Utah. It’s becoming a practicum in community engagement for master planning students as well as being a community class open to the public.” Bartholomew said.

Establishing more communication between existing CTAs is also part of his vision for the future. The final report introduces a few CTAs beyond Portland and Utah, including the **Surrey Transportation Talks Program** in the City of Surrey, Canada and the **Tampa Bay Citizens Academy on Transportation**, launched by the University of Southern Florida and the City of Tampa in the fall of 2021.

Matthew Ryan, a second-year masters student in UU’s College of Architecture + Planning, worked on the project as a graduate research assistant, digging deeper into the Portland surveys and examining other academies around the country. One goal of this work, which the authors hope to share at the 2023 annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board (TRB), is taking a deeper look at the intersections between emerging transportation academies, and how those connections might be further leveraged to improve and expand the reach of CTAs

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The research team consisted of Nathan McNeil of Portland State University, and Keith Bartholomew and Matthew Ryan of the University of Utah.

ABOUT THE FUNDERS

This research was funded by the National Institute for Transportation and Communities, with additional support from the University of Utah, Utah Transit Authority, Wasatch Front Regional Council, Utah Department of Transportation, Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City Transportation Division, and the Portland Bureau of Transportation.

THE REPORT and RESOURCES

For more details about the study, download the full report, Launching the Wasatch Transportation Academy, and the curriculum handbook at nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/project/1518

Photo courtesy of Wasatch Transportation Academy

 The National Institute for Transportation and Communities (NITC) is one of seven U.S. Department of Transportation national university transportation centers. NITC is a program of the Transportation Research and Education Center (TREC) at Portland State University. This PSU-led research partnership also includes the Oregon Institute of Technology, University of Arizona, University of Oregon, University of Texas at Arlington and University of Utah.

