Call for Proposals
Economics of Transportation in the 21st Century

To promote research in transportation economics and to strengthen the economic basis for designing transportation policy in the 21st century, the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), with the generous support of the Department of Transportation (DOT), is organizing a three-year research initiative on “Transportation Economics in the 21st Century.” This initiative will be led by NBER researchers Edward Glaeser of Harvard University, James Poterba of MIT, and Stephen Redding of Princeton University. The initiative will launch with a conference on transportation economics and infrastructure in Washington, D.C., on March 12, 2020. It is designed to bring together researchers in various subfields of economics -- energy economics, industrial organization, macroeconomics, environmental economics, regional and urban economics, regulatory economics, public finance, as well as transportation economics – to study issues of current importance and to frame the agenda for future research.

In the coming year, the initiative will support six distinct projects on various aspects of the economics of the U.S. transportation sector. It will support additional projects in future years. Potential research topics might include, but are not limited to:

- The returns to, and financing of, investments in transportation infrastructure, including roads, rail, air, pipelines, ports, and liquid natural gas terminals;

- The maintenance of transportation infrastructure, the potential role for public-private partnerships, and the potential effects of emerging technologies, such as driverless cars, in enhancing the utilization of that infrastructure;

- Transportation safety and the impact of new technologies, such as in-vehicle tests for sobriety, communication and monitoring tools that rely on the radio frequency spectrum, and new vehicle design features;

- The emergence of new transportation modalities, either as a result of technological changes that enable new business models such as sharing assets or services (transportation network companies, for example) or as a result of technological advances that create new options (electric vehicles and autonomous vehicles, for example);

- The regulation of the transportation sector at both the federal and sub-federal levels;

- The valuation of transportation characteristics or features, including travel time, congestion, reliability, flexibility, perceived safety, various transportation-related risks including cybersecurity breaches, and other mode-specific attributes;
• The impact of new technologies for managing surface freight transportation logistics, including those involving large data sets combined with statistical analysis such as machine learning, on load factors and other performance characteristics of the surface freight industry;

• The impact of the transportation sector on the broader economy, including its role in affecting the labor market and the employment prospects for workers at various skill levels, the competitiveness of the U.S. economy and its various constituent sectors, the internal structure of economic activity within urban areas, the spatial distribution of economic activity between rural and urban areas, and the costs of wholesale and retail trade.

Researchers interested in studying these topics or others that relate to transportation economics should submit short proposals of no more than five pages, single spaced, including references, tables, graphs, and other supplementary material, in PDF format by Monday, November 4, 2019. Each proposal should describe the research question to be studied, the data and methods to be used, and the composition of the research team that will be carrying out the project. Preliminary findings are welcome. The proposal should also include a conflict of interest statement describing any financial or other interests of the research team that might bear on the proposed work, especially any financial or other ties to the transportation industry. To be eligible for support, the principal investigator on each project, or at least one investigator in the case of multi-authored projects, must be a faculty member at a U.S. college or university.

Proposals may describe either theoretical or empirical projects and may be submitted by researchers with or without NBER affiliations. Projects involving scholars who are early in their careers, and from researchers from under-represented groups, are especially welcome.

Proposals may be submitted by following this link:

http://papers.nber.org/confsubmit/backend/cfprop?id=ETf20

The organizers will review the proposals and make recommendations for support, subject to the approval of the Department of Transportation. Researchers who submit proposals that are selected for inclusion in the project will be notified by December 31, 2019. The research team for each project will receive $25,000 of salary support for the principal investigator(s) and $12,500 in research assistant support, $1000 for travel, and $500 for other research costs. Investigators and research assistants must be eligible to be paid as NBER employees; the NBER will not make sub-awards.

In addition to providing research funding for a selected set of projects, the initiative will also facilitate access to a number of data sets on the transportation sector that are collected and maintained by the DOT. A partial index of the statistical products and data sets that are maintained by the Bureau of Transportation Statistics may be found at:

https://www.bts.gov/browse-statistical-products-and-data
Research teams will be expected to participate in a video preconference in March 2020 and in a capstone research conference in Cambridge, MA on October 9, 2020. The NBER will cover the cost of domestic travel and hotel expenses for up to two authors per paper and for discussants at the conference.

Questions related to research proposals or other aspects of this research initiative should be directed to Alison Oaxaca at aoaxaca@nber.org.