

2021

Leonard Transportation Center



The Proceedings of the Inland Empire Regional Mobility Dialogue Series

Feb 23, 2021

Dialogue #1

Telecommuting During the Pandemic – Lasting Impacts on the Transportation Sector

#LTC Talks

WWW.CSUSB.EDU/LTC



Introduction

Installment one of the **Leonard Transportation Center 2021 Regional Mobility Dialogue Series, Telecommuting During the Pandemic: Lasting Impacts on the Transportation Sector**, addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transportation due to the sudden and drastic shift to remote work. In an already struggling industry, experts explore the effects of this shift on the transportation sector and discuss the future of transportation in light of these changes.

Expert speakers in this dialogue included:

- **Steven Polzin**, Ph.D., recently completed his appointment as the Senior Advisor for Research and Technology in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology at the US Department of Transportation.
- **Stephen Finnegan**, lead of public affairs, public policy, media communications, community programs, and traffic safety efforts for Automobile Club of Southern Arizona (AAA)
- **Stephanie Wiggins**, Chief Executive Officer of Metrolink

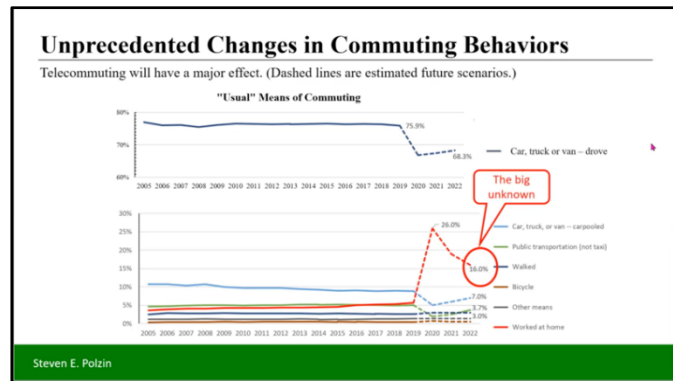
The dialogue began with an introduction from Greg Hulsizer, Vice President of HNTB Corporation, a platinum sponsor of the Dialogue series. Mr. Hulsizer reflected on the past years of LTC Dialogues and commented on his experiences navigating the telecommuting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dean Lawrence Rose, Dean of Jack H. Brown College of Business and Public Administration at California State University San Bernardino, continued introductions by thanking the sponsors of the Dialogue series for their support. He also summarized this dialogue and its importance by stating, “the pandemic and its economic percussion sit at a time that already was a time of change for the transportation industry and the need to shift back-office employees or remote work only added to the strain on public transit fleets and third-party logistics providers. So, during this dialogue, our experts and speakers will address some of the changes they see coming, discuss what we can do to mitigate these changes and look at the future a little bit and what's going to start.”

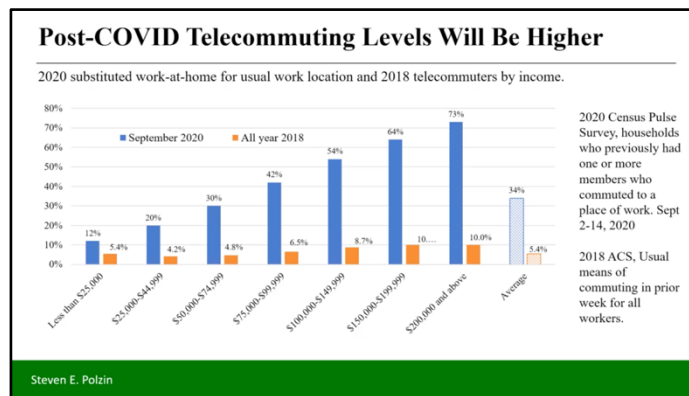
Dr. Kimberly Collins then presented current data on transportation, population, and employment in the Inland Empire to provide context to the Dialogue. She summarized that, during the pandemic, warehouse employment has remained stable while retail employment has decreased. Population is growing steadily in the region. While there are fewer numbers of individuals staying home in the Inland Empire, likely due to the nature of the workforce in the region, but number of trips per day have decreased in the beginning of the pandemic and have then remained stable. However, there was an increase in much longer vehicle trips than usual. It was also noted that air travel for individuals decreased substantially but freighted mail has increased.

Dr. Steve Polzin

Dr. Polzin began by emphasizing the great impact COVID has made on the nature of telecommuting and transportation for nearly a year, “due to the persistence of the event and the way we have had to develop accommodations.” He explained that society is seeing the effects of “communication substitution for travel,” in telecommuting arrangements, distance learning accommodations, and E-commerce patterns. The success of these efforts during COVID has been aided by the technological advancements that have been adopted by large numbers of people, such as high-speed internet and use of personal computers. Dr. Polzin shared national data on transportation trends and noted that, even pre-COVID telecommuting was the fastest changing means of work commuting. 34% of households have been impacted in the last year and have at least one member that are no longer commuting to work; most of these telecommuting jobs include those



that are of higher paid jobs than those who are still commuting to work. There has also been a significant decrease in public transit ridership. In terms of transportation trends, Dr. Polzin shared that there has been a decline in traffic during traditionally peak morning and afternoon times, which can be attributed in part to school closures along with the shift to more telecommuting. He reports that the change in demand will likely have impacts on competitive modes of



transit and congestion, priority of investment, as well. He predicts that, post-COVID, the 25-40 percent of jobs that can accommodate telecommuting may not return to normal office operations and there will likely be an increase in hybrid arrangements for work made permanent. He also noted that the lasting COVID effects on transit are different in certain geographies and based on specific needs of different sectors. He noted that there is considerable research being done on this topic in different industries that are exploring the impacts of COVID on commuting and how industries can begin to approach the likely lasting effects on commuting that COVID will have.

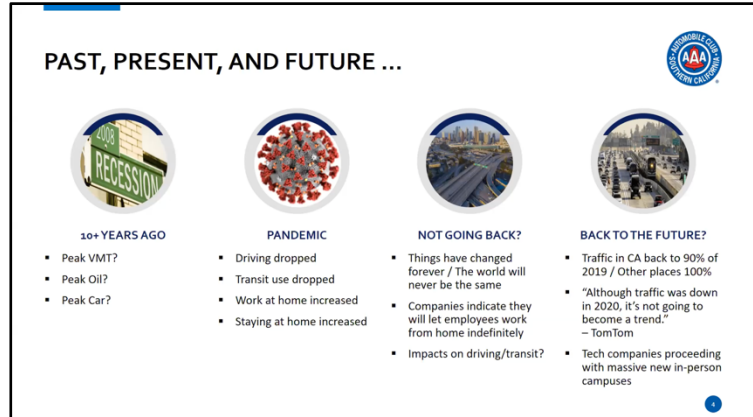
Observations

- There are also temporal and geographic shifts in commuting
- Various estimates of the share of the work force that could work at home 25-40%
- Even for those folks returning to work, the post COVID-19 workplace operations and environment may not be the same
- The geographic distribution of telecommuters is likely to be concentrated in office locations – CBDs and office clusters that are often key transit destinations.
- Lost telecommuting VMT may be made up with other travel.
- For hybrid telecommuting arrangements what will the day of week demand distribution be?
- Growing body of literature reporting worker and employer expectations
 - Lund, S. e. (2021). *The Future of Work after COVID-19*. McKinsey Global Institute
 - New Home Trends Institute. (2020). *September Trends Report, Work-From-Home, Part 1*. New Trends Institute

Steven E. Polzin

Stephen Finnegan

Mr. Finnegan began by sharing his own experiences telecommuting during the COVID pandemic. He also shared the opinion that there are significant unknowns about how things will play out in terms of commuting arrangements as we gradually ease COVID restrictions. Stephen shared vehicle miles traveled (VMT) data which highlights the fact that VMT was increasing for a long time and it appeared to be continuing in that direction until COVID happened – after which there has been a sharp decline in VMT that is now climbing back to previous levels. Working for AAA, he reported that there was also a decline in automobile crashes and claims but there was also an increase in longer trips by people driving to road trip destinations. Stephen shared insights from one of the last big events in transportation – the 2008 recession where VMT decreased substantially as many were out of jobs and had little extra money. He recalled that there was a lot of talk at the time that the transportation industry would be forever changed and VMT would never reach pre-recession levels, but that did not end up being the case. Right now, “there are competing narratives about the long-term effects on transit that may be felt but Mr. Finnegan believes that VMT will rebound in many areas eventually. He concluded, “we're all part of this experiment, whether we want to be or not, and we will all be part of moving forward to whatever direction things [are] going in the future.”



Stephanie Wiggins

Mrs. Wiggins opened by stating that the conversation had in this Dialogue “can be a very sobering one, particularly when we think about the impact of transit and during this pandemic and speaking about the future can be a little daunting.” She provided the group an overview of Metrolink as, “the third largest passenger rail in the country.” Stephanie displayed a map of the Inland Empire housing and employment centers with the Metrolink system overlaid, which highlighted just how substantial the system is for connecting people to their homes and workplaces. Stephanie stated that, “we like to say at Metrolink we're not just a ticket to ride the train, but a ticket to home ownership, which we know is the key to wealth generation and erasing income inequality.” Stephanie detailed the disruption that COVID-19 placed on normal Metrolink operations, stating that the company is still down 85% from ridership numbers this time last year and that recovery has been slow due to virus cases surging. However, she points out that many of the remaining riders are essential workers without personal



vehicles, so the service is still very much essential to support the community. While she emphasized that there is still a lot of uncertainty around ridership recovery and what the service will look like post-COVID 19, she states, “in this new normal, we will begin serving an expanded ridership demographic with change behaviors and will no longer be able to rely solely on connecting commuters to their jobs. We believe that there is a great opportunity and building out regional rail travel contributing to the economy, equity and the environment across Southern California.”



Roundtable Discussion

Kary Witt, with HNTB, facilitated a roundtable discussion with the expert speakers before the floor was opened for questions from participants.

Kary first asked the expert speakers to **share what they feel is the biggest unknown regarding COVID, transit and telecommuting.**

Stephanie Wiggins responded, “for me that the biggest unknown for us is how much longer before the virus is contained. You know its affected perceptions about health and safety about taking transit and Doran and I are here to tell you transit is extremely safe. We’re not a super spreader. We’ve been developing a number of products, but every time we’re ready to roll them out, there was a surge; and we know that depresses ridership. So, for my industry, the biggest unknown is how much longer.”

Dr. Polzin shared that he believes the biggest unknown is related to how workplaces will operate going forward and if there will be hybrid scenarios where individuals will spend substantially less time in their physical workplace offices; and how they are able to have more flexible work schedules that do not require what was once normal commuting during peak hours. “I think there might be some folks rushing back to the office for the socialization experience, but then that’ll wane and ebb and flow over time. It’s going to be real, it’ll be significant, it’ll be different, but it’s going to take us a while to have some sense of stability of what that new normal is going to be like.”

Steve Finnegan stated, “I think the biggest question the biggest unknown is timing, you know when do we recover from the pandemic, how much of a straight line or a jagged line is that recovery going to be. I think there’s a lot of pent-up demand to do a lot of things and some of those involved travel. Whether that’s recreational travel or longer distance travel or within the region or even going back to the office. So, I think that how long that takes and again how much

of a straight line or how much how often we have to return to a future surge hopefully we won't at all.”

Kary posed a second question, **“How much of this trend to working from home is here to stay and how many people do you think will never go back to an office?”**

Steven Finnegan responded that he does not have a specific answer to the question but shared that, despite having a long commute, he does personally appreciate the time he spends in the office. He reported to be surprised to learn this about himself.

Stephanie Wiggins replied, “from the telecommuting trend, I do think it's here to stay, I do think that the five day a week in office is dead... for Metrolink as an employer, I have already shared with my employees that when the stay-at-home orders are lifted, we will engage in a hybrid office so folks who live in Redlands and used to have to commute to our Pomona facility operations facility where they're going to be able to report to our San Bernardino facility, we've learned with technology we don't have to continue to force people to go to one particular site or headquarter site. So, we have to adapt as an employer to that flexibility and I also think it's going to be critical if you want to be an employer of choice. I have had a major hiring freeze underway; I am allowing mission critical positions to be filled and just yesterday, I was reminded by our HR chief that candidates are still asking what your telecommuting policy is, so I definitely think this is not going to be temporary it's going to be an expectation of employers of choice.”

Dr. Polzin said that, “employers, I think, are more likely to be accommodating to enable people to work at home,” and that shifting the culture to more opportunities for remote work will also allow for opportunities in specialized recruitment of candidates who are farther away. While certain workplaces will likely never be able to accommodate work from home, like healthcare, compensation and benefits may be adjusted to reflect that. There will be people who enjoy telecommuting and those who do not, and there will likely be options for both going forward.

Kary’s third question, **“what roles do the private sector and the government have and how do they work together to drive the best outcome from this whole situation?”**

Dr. Polzin responded specifically regarding the, “issue of travel demand management and the worst scenario is if we end up with having to provide peak capacity, one or two days a week, and have, in effect, empty trains and on congested roads overbuilt roads for five days a week that's not optimal from a resource perspective,” and he stated that the biggest issue will be to, “figure out how we can meet the needs of folks that do need that mobility and accessibility, without wasting tremendous amounts of resources.”

Steven Finnegan began by stating that, on this topic, “one size doesn't fit all, and I think that there's going to be a variety of answers to that question.” He surmised that different industries will develop their own approaches to telework and that will, hopefully, develop the flexibility to address workforce choices and that the transportation industry will be able to adapt around that as well.

Stephanie Wiggins shared that, “the private sector, their role is in information sharing with transit operators. We’ve continued to be in contact with our corporate partners to try to understand what their plans for the future in terms of supporting telecommuting are. It’s really critical, because even this past November we shifted our train schedules, because we started to see the shift where more of our riders were demanding service earlier in the morning peak and then wanting to come back earlier in the evening than normal so really having access to that information helps us better plan and as Dr Polzin said, be better stewards of the taxpayers’ dollars. I think the second thing that’s interesting I wanted to add to the dialogue is the role the government can play. Given telecommuting is going to be a continued trend, maybe not as high as it is today, but higher than it was pre-COVID, I believe, and that is really taking a fresh look at our planning and zoning regulations, why are requiring all of this parking, particularly in this post COVID environment, look at the requirement for minimum number of street parking spaces in transit intensive areas again if more people are going to be telecommuting, maybe we don’t need as much parking or parking structures.”

Kary’s final question was, “**what is the ideal outcome, how does this all end ideally?**”

Stephanie began, “for me, the ideal outcome out of COVID would be us all functioning and operating in a more effective and productive ways, so that we can really realize the mobility gains that we want, which is congestion relief, which directly improves our local economy for the Inland Empire. It improves air quality for the Inland Empire and it addresses equity.”

Steve Finnegan shared that, “I think what is hopefully going to be ideal is more flexibility and options, whether that’s at the individual level, a company level, a neighborhood level, or a government level.”

Dr. Polzin concluded with his thoughts that, “the real positive is it allows social interaction and commercial interactions to be enhanced. It’s like a new choice it’s like having a new travel option and in that sense it’s positive. It allows us to do things we couldn’t have otherwise it gives us a tremendous contingency capability for those bad weather days, etc., etc. It lets us travel more as a choice or as an asset versus as a necessity, so I think that that it’s positive in that sense it enables us to reduce travel, which is something from resources, time, environment etc. We’ve been inspired to and this is kind of the best, the most free way to do that if we can do it through communication. That’s a positive, so I think there’s a lot of positives that spill out of this that doesn’t mean it won’t need some tweaking and some accommodation in terms of policy and employer roles, etc., but I think it’s a real positive for transportation in general.”

Dean Lawrence Rose shared his experiences on Zoom calls and the difficulty he has had trying to have quality interactions across online platforms and asked the panel, “**do you think those aspects might actually drive people back to some level into a face to face and office environment?**”

Dr. Polzin shared some statistics on relationships in the workplace and discussed alternatives may come into play when transitioning to more remote work but still fostering socialization. He

stated, “I do think that that we will see some changes in culture and values and activities, and we'll see consultants, you know come along and find you know 100 ways to build teams through Zoom meetings and those kinds of things, so I suspect we'll see over the next many months and years, all kinds of strategies and somebody will be doing IQ and aptitude and personality tests and deciding whether or not you're conducive to what. I think that's all coming in and we'll sort through this over time.”

Stephanie Wiggins responded, “now I think there's no substitute for human connection. We've all had 10 months of the experiment and whether or not work, but a hug or those nonverbal cues there's just some things that technology cannot replace, so I definitely think those are the reasons why people will come back, they just won't come back like they did before. I think it'll be a hybrid.”

Steven Finnegan concluded by saying “I don't agree with that, I think there's a need for human interaction. In a variety of ways, and you do get things in person that are hard to replicate online or in this setting not impossible, it's just different and maybe harder, so I think that that desire to connect will continue to bring people physically together, even if it's not all the time, or even if it's not in the exact same way that was.

Doran Barnes asked the panel, **“I’m struck by and we spend a fair amount of time in this space, the confluence of transportation and the environment, particularly air quality and as we think about telework and the future, it does strike me that and I’d be interested the panel’s thoughts on how much of this naturally happens, how much of this should we be considering regulating given how much we’re spending regulating the emissions produced by our vehicles. One of the best ways to reduce emissions could be to have less vehicles out on the road, whether that’s whatever those kinds of vehicles are but you know how much we should take advantage of this experiment to rethink or add to our environmental challenges and trying to solve those versus just letting happen, what will happen?”**

Stephanie Wiggins answered, “I do agree with you during that we should leverage this opportunity while people are open to rethinking both on the private sector side and the public sector side because now telecommuting is even a bottom-line benefit to the private sector right, they're talking about getting rid of office leases etc., reducing their overhead, so this is an opportunity maybe to convene them to talk about how we can voluntarily do something that actually is for the greater good.”

Steve Finnegan responded, “it reminds me of the old saying that I probably won't get right, but ‘never waste the opportunity that the crisis provided.’ I think that there are opportunities with this as well. I also I can't help but think back, you're talking about air quality, you know some of these debates about air quality and transportation have been going on since at least the 70s, if not earlier and back then, two major experiments were trying, one-word technology mandates on vehicles and fuels and the other were efforts to get people ‘out of their cars.’ One wasn't tremendously successful. The mandates on technology and fuels bringing people out of their cars was it that the objective was an abject failure because that drove me... just increased evermore over the decades, but air quality improved greatly, and so there, there are lessons there as well...”

So, some of the Air Quality questions are directly related to how we move around in something that's related to technology and other things.”

Matt Bushman with HNTB asked, **“what's the best way to engage both your company in the projects and the culture?”**

Stephanie Wiggins began by sharing, “from the company culture perspective, I’m probably, since mid-April, I’ve been hosting three times a week virtual coffee breaks for 30-minute increments. And those that have been wildly successful, it engages not only the people who are working remotely but also the people who don't have a choice and have to come into the office and that has turned into a great opportunity for the employees.”

Dr. Polzin answered that there is a learning curve with how to interact in social situations in a telecommuting work culture but that, “people will learn what tactics and strategies and frequency of communication and how to keep it casual, and you know how to deal with confidential things and what can be done in a group and I think that'll take some sorting through...figure out what works best for your people in your culture, but I think you'll need to be explicit in initiating some communications that that might have been spontaneous in the hallway kind of thing. Figuring out how to treat something casually that would have been at stick your head in the door kind of quick question. But all of a sudden if it's a scheduled call there may be more nervousness about it and folks will learn how to deal with those kinds of accommodations and it might be, you know Skype things instead of teams' things and different strategies might work differently for different contexts.”

Moving the Dialogue Forward: Ideas from the Participants

After the presentations, the Dialogue attendees discussed the ideas presented and worked together as a group to discuss solutions to move it forward. The top three ideas from the participants have been categorized and summarized below.

Environmental Impacts. Participants discussed the potential environmental impacts.

- The potential for there to be less emissions and pollution as a result of less driving during the pandemic
- The potential for leaders to get innovative with ways to work towards regulation that will benefit the environment while society is open to change and in flux.

Effects of COVID and telecommuting on transit systems and revenue. Participants identified the need for public transit systems to be more accessible through integration.

- Examining the impact that less gas taxes collected with people are commuting less.
- Looking at how to structure necessary transit services in ways that are not wasteful but still fill ever-changing needs in the community.
- Using this change to evaluate need and funding for infrastructure and possibly repurposing things like parking for other more utilized needs.

Equity and Access. The groups also discussed equity and access to opportunities to work from home.

- Understanding that there is still a digital divide that exists today
- The ability to work from home is not available to everyone and access to transportation is still an issue for many who are essential workers and still have to commute.
- The pandemic has provided an opportunity for society to be open minded and innovating in addressing larger systemic issues like equity.

About

About The Dialogue Series

The Leonard Transportation Center (LTC) at California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB), presented a bi-monthly dialogue series on topics relevant to the future of transportation in the Inland Empire. The series, which was open to the public, was sponsored by HNTB Corporation and was held every other month starting in February 2018.

Dialogue topics ranged from understanding the current mobility dilemma and its causes to potential solutions like congestion pricing, transit; emerging technologies such as autonomous and connected vehicles and new ways of funding transportation infrastructure. Attendees had the opportunity to hear from transportation experts and engage in vigorous discussion about the transportation challenges facing the Inland Empire. The official hashtag is #LTCTalks for all social media platforms.

About Leonard Transportation Center (LTC)

The Leonard Transportation Center (LTC) at California State University, San Bernardino opened in 2006 with a focus on regional transportation needs. The vision of Bill and Barbara Leonard was to create a center that focuses on the unique transportation opportunities and challenges the Inland Empire faces. Today, the LTC is working to expand its research and student engagement programs. Focal points include transportation management and governance issues, development of new technologies, and transnational studies. Their vision is to work collaboratively to seek solutions to assist residents, businesses, government and non-profit agencies, and international partners to work together on improving sustainability and quality of life in the Inland Empire. For more information, visit www.csusb.edu/LTC

About HNTB

HNTB Corporation is an employee-owned infrastructure solutions firm serving public and private owners and contractors. HNTB's work in California dates back to its founding in 1914. Today, HNTB continues to grow in size and service offerings to clients in California from seven office locations, currently employing more than 350 full-time professionals. With more than a century of service, HNTB understands the life cycle of infrastructure and addresses clients' most complex technical, financial and operational challenges. Professionals nationwide deliver a full range of infrastructure-related services, including award-winning planning, design, program management and construction management. For more information, visit www.hntb.com

About San Bernardino International Airport (SBD)

Conveniently located in the heart of the Inland Empire, close to major freeways and just 60 miles from Los Angeles, San Bernardino (SBD) International Airport is strategically positioned to meet growing aviation activity, including cargo, business aviation, general aviation, and commercial airlines by providing competitive rates for aviation companies and local businesses looking to stretch their wings and expand their horizons. With extensive stretches of pristine runway and acres of prime land available for aviation development, SBD International Airport is ready to help our community and region reach new destinations. For more information, visit www.sbdairport.com

About San Bernardino Valley College (SBV)

San Bernardino Valley College will become the college of choice for students in the Inland Empire and will be regarded as the alma mater of successful, lifelong learners. We will build our reputation on the quality of our programs and services and on the safety, comfort, and beauty of our campus. We will hold both our students and ourselves to high standards of achievement and will expect all members of the college community to function as informed, responsible, and active members of society. For more information, visit www.valleycollege.edu