Several states have pursued new high-speed and intercity passenger rail (HS&IPR) services to keep up with an unprecedented surge in ridership since 2000. Amtrak, the primary intercity rail service provider in the country, reported more than 30 million passenger rides in 2015, a significant increase when compared to 2000 ridership statistics. A team managed by the UTC completed a report that resulted in a framework to present the return on investment from HS&IPR that explicitly allows for a variety of alternative perspectives. These include spatial areas of concern, national, regional or local benefits and the viewpoints of specific stakeholders related to the labor, leisure and business visitor markets.

The research team — led by UTC Director Dr. P.S. Sriraj, Assistant Professor Dr. Bo Zou, former UTC Executive Director Steve Schlickman, along with EDR Group — took an integrative approach to identify all benefit and cost elements involved in a conventional benefit-cost analysis, as well as the economic impact analysis and social impact analysis processes. The report, “Framework for Assessing the ROI for High-Speed and Intercity Rail Projects,” is comprised of five chapters that cover the need for a framework to address ROI, cost elements, benefit and impact elements, the methodology employed and the specific framework developed. The American Public Transportation Association sponsored the study.

Dr. Paul Metaxatos Honored for 20 Years at CUPPA

On the morning of December 15, colleagues from the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs (CUPPA) gathered to recognize Dr. Paul Metaxatos along with 10 other faculty and staff at the annual Employee Recognition Reception. In 2017, Dr. Metaxatos celebrated his 20th year with the UTC, where he currently holds the position of Associate Director for Research Programs and Research Associate Professor.

At the reception, UTC Director Dr. P.S. Sriraj described Dr. Metaxatos, as “a scholar who lets his research speak for itself.” He noted the role Dr. Metaxatos played in vital UTC studies that addressed intercity bus transportation and obesity and the built environment, along with two more recent projects that centered on pedestrian and cyclist safety at railroad and rapid transit grade crossings in metropolitan Chicago.

Dr. Metaxatos’ commitment to UIC began in the early 1990s. He arrived in Chicago from his native Greece and later earned his Master’s degree in Urban Geography from UIC, with a specialization in Transportation Geography and GIS Systems. While pursuing his Doctorate degree in Public Policy Analysis in the early 1990s, he participated as a graduate researcher on the ADVANCE study, a revolutionary project that took on the feasibility of employing in-vehicle driver navigation systems. Congratulations to Dr. Metaxatos on this very noteworthy accomplishment and for his dedication to the UTC, CUPPA and transportation industry.
Long-range planning and funding practices, a review of the comprehensive plan to guide Northeast Illinois, and an analysis of gaps in surface transportation were addressed during the Fall 2017 Seminar Series hosted by the Urban Transportation Center. Speakers from two state agencies, the Chicago area’s regional planning organization and the director of a university-managed urban planning center led the discussions. Visit the 2017 Seminar Series page to download presentations. Here are short recaps of the presentations, held in the Great Cities Institute conference room at CUPPA Hall.

Illinois Tollway Planning Process. Replacing 50-year-old pavement within the roadways managed by the Illinois Tollway “is not rhetoric, it’s a reality.” Rocco Zucchero, the Tollway’s Chief of Planning, made that statement during his presentation October 5. A self-professed “transit person at heart,” Zucchero shared insight on how the ISTHA undertakes large corridor reconstruction projects and new roadway development from the initial planning steps through implementation. In a free-flowing talk, he pointed out that the Tollway builds strategic partnerships with other transit agencies, governments and utilities to get new projects, like the recently-opened Illinois Route 390/Elgin-O’Hare Western Access tollway, completed.

The FTA Transit Funding Application Process Made Simple. There’s a distinction between the transit programs managed by the Illinois Department of Transportation and the bricks and mortar transportation projects needed to keep people moving across Illinois. During an informative presentation October 19, IDOT Deputy Director of Transit Carrie Cooper explained how the state administers federal funds from applications prepared by local and regional transit agencies and governments. Cooper said the Transit department administers funding through grants and contracts to large and small urban areas as well as rural areas across Illinois. At the time of the presentation, the department was managing 35 federal grants related to 57 state appropriations and contracts. Ultimately, IDOT is responsible for ensuring that grant dollars administered comply with federal guidelines.

Looking Back on CMAP’s GO TO 2040. The process to develop a comprehensive regional plan designed to guide livability, human capital, governance and mobility can take on “Libra characteristics.” These include being balanced, diplomatic and fair, as well as indecisive and detached. Bob Dean, Executive Director for Planning at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), used the astrological zodiac sign as an analogy during his November 2 presentation on the development of the GO TO 2040 plan, unveiled in 2005 to guide responsible growth of the seven-county metropolitan Chicago area. Dean incorporated whimsical images to convey the process used to arrive at GO TO 2040, then steered the conversation in the direction of CMAP’s still-under-development project, ON TO 2050, which is scheduled for adoption in October.

No Choice But to Drive: Identifying the Most Significant Gaps in the Intercity Bus and Rail System in the United States. The intercity bus network has evolved recently, with newcomer express bus services like Megabus and Bolt Bus competing with established carriers like Greyhound and Trailways. And, Amtrak continues to provide transportation options to many cities within a 75 to 400 mile range. Yet, despite the recent expansion of rail and bus service, many prominent routes remain without effective ground travel options, fostering dependence on driving or flying. During the final presentation of the semester on November 16, Professor Joe Schwieterman, director of the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University, shared an interactive tool that outlined gaps in the U.S. transportation system, including several around Chicago.
Since arriving at UIC in 2012, Assistant Professor Nebiyou Tilahun has concentrated his research in the areas of travel behavior, accessibility and the social issues that pertain to modern transportation. Dr. Tilahun manages the Travel Behavior & Urban Systems Group Research Center, and in 2015 launched the Metropolitan Chicago Accessibility Explorer, a digital resource to better evaluate accessibility by four common transportation modes to many types of destinations in the urban environment.

Your research centers on travel behavior, accessibility, and the social issues surrounding transportation. What’s the focus of any current or ongoing research?

One of the areas that I am interested in is the relationship between social networks and travel. The desire to meet with friends and family generates a considerable travel demand. I study how social networks, their geography, and the types of relationships in these networks shape travel decisions. Related to this area of research is also the effect that rapidly changing communication technologies have on in-person social activities and on social activity travel decisions. I am also working with my students on the effects of limited mobility on people's social networks and the satisfaction they express in their social life. These are some of the areas that I am currently working on.

The last mile remains a challenge in metropolitan Chicago and beyond. What resources or policies are needed to alleviate the last mile leg of a commute for travelers?

The last mile problem refers to issues associated with the portion of a transit trip between an activity location and the first or last transit stop. In past work, we have shown that it is a multidimensional problem. Part of solving last mile problems is having the right infrastructure, sidewalks, lighting, less circuitous routes and other factors that make it easy for travelers to traverse this portion of the trip. It is also important to make sure these facilities can accommodate all users.

Beyond that, even in places where the last mile portion of a trip is relatively short and sidewalks are available, things such as station area safety and corridor safety play an important role in addressing traveler last mile concerns. Other solutions that can enhance choice and reduce last mile problems include bike share systems deployment and facilitating shared rides to address the problem.

Within CUPPA, you direct the Travel Behavior & Urban Systems Research Group. Please share more about how the group was formed and its mission.

The group is a research lab composed of myself and graduate student research assistants working with me. Our goal is to perform research that is particularly focused on travel behavior, accessibility, and social issues surrounding transportation. We are also interested in creating products that other planners and decision makers can use to make better planning decisions. We have created the Metropolitan Chicago Accessibility Explorer. We are now starting to work on a similar tool that is specifically designed to highlight areas with last mile issues in our region.

In 2015 you led research that resulted in the Metropolitan Chicago Accessibility Explorer, a digital resource that lets planners and agencies better evaluate accessibility by four transportation modes. Can you share any updates?

The explorer has had many users since its launch. We use it as a teaching tool. We provide data on request to other organizations that are working to address different regional planning challenges. For example, its data was recently used in the Cook County Long Range Transportation Plan. We also use it internally as a data source for our research.

You completed your education and earned your doctorate from the University of Minnesota. What brought you to Chicago? Do you miss the Minnesota winters?

I came to Chicago first as a post-doc in the Urban Transportation Center; and, after a year back in Minnesota, I returned as an assistant professor in the Department of Urban Planning and Policy. Prior to that I lived in Minnesota for a long time. That is where my family first settled when we came from Ethiopia, and I still have family there. I am very fond of the Twin Cities, but I do not miss the Minnesota winters.
More than 65 transportation scholars, industry professionals and students from across the U.S. and overseas joined Urban Transportation Center faculty researchers and staff and University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) affiliated faculty colleagues January 8 at the UTC and CUPPA Alumni Association Reception held during the 2018 Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C.

Generous sponsorship was provided by North American railway industry leader CN Railway and the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at UIC.

For the fourth consecutive year, the reception was held at Acadiana restaurant near the Washington Convention Center and featured networking, socializing and the announcement of the winners of the 2017 George Krambles Transportation Scholarship Awards: UTC Director Dr. P.S. Sriraj announced the recipients. These scholars earned cash awards in the 2017 Krambles Awards competition.

1st Place: Mohamadhossein Noruzoliaee for his paper on: “Modeling Travelers’ Adoption of Autonomous Vehicles and Transportation System Performance.”

2nd Place (tie): Fatemeh Nazari for her paper on: “Shared Mobility vs. Private Car Ownership: A Multivariate Analysis of Public Interest in Autonomous Vehicles.”

2nd Place (tie): Jaeyong Shin for his paper on: “The Role of Residential Location Choice on the Travel Behavior of Young Adults.”

Among the guests were former UTC Director Dr. Robert E. Paaswell, now Distinguished Professor at the City College of New York, and representatives from these organizations, agencies and institutions: The City of Chicago Department of Transportation, the Chicago Transit Authority, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the Transportation Research Board, DePaul University’s Chaddick Institute, Morgan State University, the NURail consortium, the Shared Use Mobility Center, Benesch Consulting and Engineering News Record magazine.

Around 15 alumni from the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs (CUPPA) and other academic departments at UIC attended. UTC researchers also contributed to the 2018 TRB Annual Meeting, which attracts more than 14,000 professionals from around the world, by participating in committee meetings, delivering presentations and sharing transportation research results.
Director’s Message: A Robust Spring 2018 Forecast

By Dr. P.S. Sriraj, Director

A successful TRB Annual Meeting, confirmation of new research studies and the appointment of a cadre of additional graduate research assistants. That aptly sums up what’s happened at the Urban Transportation Center in the early days of 2018.

TRB 2018 Remembered. As noted on page 4, the UTC made its presence known at the 97th Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board held January 7 to 11 in Washington, D.C. Faculty researchers and staff actively participated in committee meetings and education sessions, and I am honored to have been elected as a Executive Committee member of the Council of University Transportation Centers (CUTC). I look forward to serving CUTC in this capacity and helping to shape the narrative of transportation research through this forum.

The annual UTC and CUPPA Alumni Association reception January 8 brought together friends and colleagues, like former UTC Director Dr. Robert A. Paaswell, with UIC alumni, industry professionals and members of the academic community for an evening filled with networking and conversation on all things transportation. Congratulations to the three scholars named as 2017 Krambles Transportation Awards scholarship recipients.

Research Underway. The new year brings the challenge of taking on additional research assignments sponsored by the Illinois Department of Transportation and other leading national and local organizations. Projects launched in early 2018 will address economic development, alleviating the “last mile” of a commute, ways to address delays for motorists at rail grade crossings, the impact of health on transportation and managing mobility options. Watch for updates throughout the year.

Welcome Spring 2018 RA Cadre. And, a tremendous group of PhD and Master’s candidates from the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs have been brought on to assist faculty and staff researchers during the Spring 2018 semester. We are pleased to announce the appointment of PhD candidates Em Hall and Anton Rozhkov, and Master’s candidates Shazal Afraaz, Eric Boria, Elizabeth DeChant, Katherine Faydash, Krupa Gajjar, Jessica Jones, Shi Lin and Michael McCarthy. These student transportation and planning scholars join returning research assistants Lucy Chen and Sarah Geinosky, bringing the total to 12. And, undergraduate researcher Herbert Nuwagaba will be working with me on a special project through the Urban Public Policy Fellows program, arranged by our CUPPA colleagues at the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement. Welcome to all!