DIRECTOR’S LETTER
A letter from Dan Sperling, director of ITS–Davis

March 2015

It seems like only yesterday, on our 15th Anniversary, I was describing ITS-Davis as an adolescent full of promise. Here we are, almost a decade later, a full-fledged 20-something out changing the world!

So much has changed since that time in 2006. Oil prices surged and collapsed; climate policy briefly flourished, quickly collapsed (except in California) and is now re-emerging; cities continue to revive; on-demand, app-based ride services are disrupting taxis – thanks in large part to the market boom of smartphones; more than 20 models of plug-in electric cars are available, many of them nationwide; and now autonomous cars are all the rage (at least in the media).

Change also came on the home front. Our growth surged, aided by the creation of a transportation and energy “hub” on the university’s West Village campus, the largest zero net-energy community in the country. In the past nine years, we’ve launched centers devoted to plug-in electric vehicles, sustainable energy pathways, China energy and transportation, and policy.

Together with this growth, we’ve pursued a cultural transformation: focusing on research that is impactful and devising techniques to increase its impact. Most researchers utter this mantra of “making a difference,” but we’re inserting it into our DNA. We’re creating a new university species that bridges the gap between academia, government and industry.

One mechanism for doing so is the Policy Institute for Energy, Environment and the Economy, which we spun off in 2011 to leverage university expertise to inform and influence public and private decision-making.

Another is our new National Center for Sustainable Transportation, a $13 million research, education and outreach consortium for the U.S. Department of Transportation, awarded in 2013. The National Center is led by Professor Susan Handy, in partnership with UC Riverside, USC, Cal State Long Beach, University of Vermont and Georgia Tech (populated by alums Randy Guensler and Ram Pendyala and our Professor Emeritus Pat Mokhtarian). The National Center is not only conducting cutting-edge research but making sure its work informs and influences decision making. Together, the National Center and ITS-Davis are generating state-of-the-knowledge white papers, blogs, policy briefs and webinars; convening workshops, conferences and high level policy meetings; and aiding other states and governments in accelerating electric vehicles and carbon policy.

Our Sustainable Transportation Energy Pathways (STEPS) research consortium co-led by Professor Joan Ogden and Dr. Lew Fulton has just launched its third four-year program to
enhance our understanding of the transitions and pathways to an alternative-fuel transportation future. This group of 20+ faculty and researchers, 20+ graduate students, and 25 funding partners—including most of the major car and oil companies in the world and major government agencies—produces timely, science-based analysis, tools and insights to inform industry and government planning.

Our Plug-in Hybrid & Electric Vehicle Research Center team led by Dr. Tom Turrentine is the go-to resource for addressing consumer response to plug-in electric vehicles; the role of car dealerships in the sales and marketing of plug-in vehicles; and the use of mobile apps to track driving behavior and real-time fuel consumption.

Perhaps most innovative and audacious was the creation last year of the China-U.S. Zero Emission Vehicle Policy Lab, in collaboration with the Chinese and California governments. Under the direction of Yunshi Wang, researchers will help design policy instruments and study consumer purchase and use behavior to determine what types of advanced vehicles are most desired, where to place charging stations, and the effectiveness of incentives.

Our most notable and enduring accomplishment is the nurturing and training of incredibly passionate and accomplished graduate students. Our alumni are now coming of age, just like ITS-Davis, earning leadership positions in industry, government, academia and NGOs. David Friedman, who was in the first graduating class of our innovative Transportation Technology and Policy Graduate program, was appointed by President Obama as deputy administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Anthony Eggert was a California Energy Commissioner and is now the transportation program director at the ClimateWorks Foundation. Nic Lutsey in January 2015 received the prestigious national “Excellence in Automotive Policy Analysis” award from the Society of Automotive Engineers.

Meanwhile, seven alumni are currently chairing or have recently chaired committees at the Transportation Research Board in advanced technology, travel behavior, energy and air quality. They include Caroline Rodier, Jane Lin, Tim Lipman, Jonathan Rubin, Randy Guensler, Kostas Goulias and Ram Pendyala. Pretty good for a program just entering early adulthood.

For myself, as I begin my year as chair of the TRB Executive Committee I look forward to spreading the word of our great successes here at ITS-Davis, while engaging TRB’s more than 7,000 volunteers participating in more 200 standing committees to advance transportation sustainability issues. I am honored to lead both organizations and am truly excited about the opportunities ahead.