

Talking ITS to the masses

A pledge to raise the visibility of ITS both within the transportation community and on Capitol Hill came yesterday from the new head of the US DoT's Research and Innovation Technology Administration (RITA).

Speaking at the opening plenary session of the ITS America Annual Meeting, Peter Appel added that the ITS joint programme office within RITA would be key to turning research into practical solutions to transportation challenges in the US in years to come.

He said he had taken the job of RITA Administrator because of the attitudes of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and President Obama, who had both made it clear that technology and research would play a huge part in policy-making in the next few years. "When Secretary LaHood approached me, it was this commitment to research that sealed the deal," he said.

He added that multi-modal collaboration was particularly dear to his heart, as he had seen in the past how such collaboration magnified the beneficial impact of research and investment in transportation solutions.

ITS America yesterday announced its own innovative approach in the search for such solutions, by seeking answers to congestion problems from outside the normal circles of traffic professionals.

The ITS Innovation Challenge will make use of co-sponsors including IBM, Virginia DoT, the American Automobile Association and ITS Sweden.

The winner of the \$50,000 prize for the best solution will be announced at the ITS World Congress in Stockholm in September, with the money to be used to help develop their proposed solution.

As well as seeking to tap new sources of inspiration to solve congestion problems, the competition will seek new ways of generating interest in the contest. It will be run over the internet over three months, making use of the co-sponsors' marketing networks to try to engage the widest possible numbers of people.

"You could have an economist or a housewife submitting potential solutions and winning," said Scott Belcher, ITS America's President and CEO.

"We've been trying to break the mould, trying to break out of the normal way of doing business. I've been in my job for 18 months and one of the things I've been most surprised by is listening to the same discussions over and over again."

The winning entry will not necessarily be a global or even national solution to a problem, he added. Someone in a small town with rush hour congestion problems could win.