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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
August 19, 2003

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New Report Ranks Top Metro Areas with Worst Air Pollution

Half of All Americans Breathing Unhealthy Air
Congress Poised to Roll Back Clean Air Laws and Cut Funding for Transportation Options

State-by-State Fact Sheets Calculate Number of Bad Air Days, Public Health Costs and Prevalence of Asthma by Metro Area

Washington, DC – Nearly half of all Americans - 133 million people – are breathing unhealthy air according to a new report by the Surface Transportation Policy Project. In fact, air quality in dozens of metropolitan areas has gotten worse over the last decade, while new scientific studies link air pollution to a host of public health issues including asthma, heart disease and certain cancers. The study concludes that transportation is a major contributor to air pollution nationwide, yet some in Congress want to undermine clean air protections and cut funding for transportation alternatives like transit, rail and buses that reduce traffic and air pollution.

“Our study shows air pollution continues to be a serious health problem and transportation sources are a significant part of that problem. The public deserves a federal transportation program that lowers their exposure to unhealthy air and delivers transportation choices beyond simply having to turn an ignition key,” said Anne Canby, President of the Washington D.C.-based Surface Transportation Policy Project, which authored the report.

Clearing the Air, Public Health Threats from Cars and Heavy Duty Vehicles- Why We Need to Protect Federal Clean Air Laws ranks metropolitan areas nationwide by the highest number of days of unhealthy air pollution levels over the last three years using new data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Riverside-San Bernardino ranked worst nationwide with 445 days of unhealthy air during 2000-2002 (an average of 148 days per year.) Other cities ranking in the top twelve worst include Fresno, CA, Los Angeles, CA, Sacramento, CA, Pittsburgh, PA, Knoxville, TN, Birmingham, AL and Cleveland, OH. The report also includes state fact sheets that identify cities in each state with the worst air pollution and the prevalence of asthma by metro area.

"Millions come to the emergency department because of asthma and other respiratory problems. We are facing a public health epidemic because the number of Americans with asthma continues to rise. From everything we know about air pollution and asthma, the problem could get worse if Congress weakens

clean air protections," said Dr. Carlos A. Camargo, an asthma researcher and member of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Smog (ozone) levels have remained steady and dozens of metropolitan areas are suffering from a severe increase in air pollution, even though some progress has been made. For instance, the Greenville--Spartanburg—Anderson (SC) region suffered the greatest increase in smog levels nationwide with a staggering 175% increase between 1993-1997 and 1998-2002. Other areas that experienced major increases in ozone pollution over the last decade include Charlotte, NC, Akron, OH, Youngstown, OH, Knoxville, TN, and Memphis, TN.

The enormous increases in the amount of driving (up 162 percent since 1969) and the number of daily vehicle trips made (up 57 percent since 1969) have overwhelmed air quality gains that have been made from cleaner engine technologies.

Air pollutants from cars, buses and trucks, particularly ground-level ozone and particulate matter (PM), can exacerbate respiratory diseases and trigger asthma attacks, increasing the risk of death for seniors and children. Nationally, transportation is responsible for more than 50 percent of carbon monoxide, about 34 percent of NOx emissions, and more than 29 percent of hydrocarbon emissions (which combine with NOx in sunlight to form ozone or smog.)

The public health costs of pollution from cars and trucks have been estimated at between $40 billion and $64 billion per year. The bulk of these public health costs are attributable to premature death, accounting for 77 percent of costs. Using the public health cost assigned by the Federal Highway Administration per vehicle mile traveled, STPP estimated these costs per metro region. Our largest metro areas - New York, Chicago and Los Angeles - suffered an excess of one billion in public health costs.

"The public health impact of air pollutants from cars and trucks is enormous," said Dr. Howard Frumkin, Professor and Chair of the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health at the Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University, speaking for the American Public Health Association. "Thousands of Americans suffer and even die prematurely because of air pollution each year, from asthma, other respiratory diseases, heart diseases, cancer, and other ailments. Transportation policies that clean up our air are essential public health policy."

Childhood asthma in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last two decades. In 2001, 8.7 percent (6.3 million) of all American children were estimated to have asthma.

“When there are more kids carrying inhalers to school than lunchboxes, you know you have a problem,” said Daniel Swartz, Executive Director of the Children’s Environmental Health Network.

Asthma is almost twice as common among African Americans as it is among whites, even when controlling for income levels. African American children are three times as likely as whites to be hospitalized for treatment of asthma.

"A higher proportion of minority populations have illnesses like asthma that can be caused or aggravated by air pollution," said Dr. Luz Claudio, Associate Professor at Mt. Sinai Medical Center.

Specifically, proposals before Congress would reduce the frequency with which transportation plans must be reviewed for their air quality impacts and excuse metropolitan areas from having to consider the long-term air quality impacts of transportation projects. Lawmakers will soon vote on this legislation and this report demonstrates the critical need for Congress to protect and strengthen clean air laws and funding.

Recommendations of the report:

- Protect and strengthen clean air laws, ensuring cities with air pollution problems have resources to address their problem, especially for health concerns from fine particulate matter
- Fully fund the CMAQ (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality) program in the federal transportation law to meet new demands, and allocate funding directly to the metro areas with unhealthy air
- Strengthen the role of regional planning agencies in order to reduce transportation-related air pollution
- Encourage a balanced approach to reducing air pollution that emphasizes cleaner vehicles and more convenient transportation options like mass transit, bicycling, and walking
- Keep a strong analytic review process to meet healthy air goals

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The Full Report can be viewed at www.transact.org

Background:

The report was released nationally on a telephone press conference call hosted by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, with representatives from the American Public Health Association, the American College of Emergency Physicians, the Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York, and the Children's Environmental Health Network.

The Surface Transportation Policy Project is a diverse, nationwide coalition working to ensure safer communities and smarter transportation choices that enhance the economy, improve public health, promote social equity, and protect the environment.