

## FOIA and Transportation

Through FOIA, we have learned about a numerous persistent problems involving transportation in America. But transportation journalism has also revealed limits to the power of FOIA.

**FOIA serves an essential tool to uncover problems in government.** Following are only a few examples:

- **A defective ignition switch that killed at least 13 people wasn't the only fatal problem that a car-maker avoided addressing despite federal attention; reports known as "death inquiries" from other accidents showed GM pleading ignorance and in some cases even replying "G.M. opts not to respond."** ("Documents Show General Motors Kept Silent on Fatal Crashes," New York Times, July 15, 2014; <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/business/documents-show-general-motors-kept-silent-on-fatal-crashes.html>);
- **A 2010 law updated reporting requirements for crime and security events on cruise ships, but the new provisions resulted in the release of information that obscured risks and trends.** ("Watchdogs urge better reporting of cruise ship crime," Florida Today, June 10, 2013; <http://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/news/2013/06/10/cruise-ship-crime/2407523/>);
- **Intercity bus travel has been a fast-growing form of commercial transportation, but only after a string of deadly bus crashes did the federal agency responsible for overseeing bus transit impose heavier penalties for repeated violations.** ("Unsafe Buses Run Until Fatal Crashes After U.S. Inaction," Bloomberg News, October 4, 2011; <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-04/unsafe-buses-run-until-crashes-u-s-fails-to-act.html>);
- **Over \$119 million to boost transportation infrastructure and services in America was not utilized by the local recipients who sought funding for community projects.** ("Disappearmarks: Millions in SAFETEA-LU transit earmarks are unspent," Sunlight Foundation Reporting Group, June 22, 2010; <http://reporting.sunlightfoundation.com/2010/disappearmarks-millions-safetea-lu-transit-earmarks-are-unspent/>);
- **A deadly bridge collapse in Minnesota spurred federal officials to order inspections of all similar bridges, some of which were years overdue – only to realize that agency data were distinctly uneven and that the inspections could likewise be dangerously uneven.** ("Late bridge inspections put public at risk," MSNBC, January 30, 2008; <http://bridges.msnbc.com>).

**But FOIA has its limits.**

- **The State Department took six years to release information about traffic violations committed by diplomats, relatives, and embassy personnel; some information was withheld for "national security" reasons.** ("Diplomatic Drivers: Hundreds Pulled Over for Serious Offenses," NBC4 News (Washington), November 21, 2014; <http://www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/Diplomatic-Drivers-283237621.html>);
- **The National Security Archive noted that a pair of FOIA requests from 2005, about an airplane crash and DOT whistleblower complaints for an upcoming congressional hearing, remained unanswered over five years later.** ("Eight Federal Agencies Have FOIA Requests a Decade Old, According to Knight Open Government Survey," National Security Archive, July 4, 2011; <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB349/>);
- **Rollover crashes killed hundreds of Americans in the 1990s, but tire manufacturers opposed releasing data to the public under a new law until an appellate court ruled against them almost five years after the law went into effect.** ("Accident data to be released," Los Angeles Times, July 23, 2008; <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/23/business/fi-crash23>).