

Issue Overview

Lillian Borrone, *Director, Port Commerce Department, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey*

I am pleased to serve as the moderator of this session, Intermodal Hub Facilities and Corridors, because it gives me the opportunity to present four experts on four projects that individually and collectively indicate how intermodal systems can add to efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and environmental enhancement in moving people and goods.

Two of the projects—Amtrak’s Union Station and the UPS Chicago Area Consolidation Hub (CACH)—demonstrate how the hub-and-spoke concept, often applied in the aviation industry, can be recrafted to improve, and indeed provide, superior intermodal transportation service to passengers and freight customers. The other two projects—the Tchoupitoulas Corridor and the Alameda Corridor—especially attract my attention, not only because they aim to create critical links between waterborne transportation modes and landside systems, but also because they are moving well beyond the concept phase toward realization.

I stress the progress of these projects because too often there is a large gap between intermodalism as a concept and intermodalism in practice. Conceptually, intermodalism is more often a planner’s vision of how our transportation systems should work. It holds the promise of a more efficient distribution system by effectively making a seamless combination of the service and capacity advantages of each mode. As transportation planners, we can easily describe ideal intermodal systems, draw diagrams of what they should look like, and fill pages in our textbooks with discussions on how they should work. But on a practical level, true intermodalism in this country—that is, the ability to offer convenient, rapid, efficient, and safe transfer of people and goods from one mode to another—has a long way to go. Again and again we are confronted with the dichotomy between concept and practice. Most of us know why: process delays, “NIMBYism,” funding constraints, jurisdictional and political conflicts, and environmental limitations that dampen the enthusiasm of even the most ardent intermodalist.

As the following brief review will show, the burden of overcoming these obstacles to effective intermodalism should receive greater support from our national transportation policy. Historically, that policy has directed government regulation and resources in ways that maximized national mobility in a pragmatic, problem-solving manner. The policy’s authors recognized that transportation played an important role in meeting the economic and commercial needs of our country.

The first major national transportation legislation, which created the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), was passed in 1887. This legislation, also known as the Granger Act, used federal economic regulation to help farmers get their produce to the growing urban markets and overcome unfair railroad price and service practices. The nation's first interregional highway systems also were developed to deliver produce to urban markets.

By 1940 individual modal systems had grown apace to meet the needs of manufacturers and urban retailers as well as farmers. The 1940 amendments to the ICC legislation stated that the "national transportation policy of the Congress [is] to provide for fair and impartial regulation of *all* modes of transportation . . . and to recognize and preserve the *inherent advantages* of each. . . ." Because the ICC regulations protected single-mode development, the trucking industry was nurtured from infancy to major mode status along with rail and waterborne service.

For the next 30 years, national transportation policy supported separate but impartial modal development, "all to the end of developing, coordinating, and preserving a national transportation system by water, highway, and rail, as well as other means, adequate to meet the needs of the commerce of the United States, of the Postal Service, and of the national defense."

By the late 1970s, congressional policy makers decided that deregulation of the modes was necessary to give the private sector the freedom to refine and improve the multimodal transportation system and to encourage the development of an intermodal freight system. The intent was the same as it was in 1887 and in 1940: to do what was best for the economic well-being and commerce of this country. Regulation that had once been a helping hand in the development of our surface transportation system became a hindrance. The railroad industry's response to deregulation has resulted in a strengthened contribution to the movement of general freight—a business that for the railroads had been on a steady decline; no system has benefited more from the loosening of regulations than rail-based intermodalism.

Now we have the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which recognizes the fact that our transportation system must respond to a global economy served mainly by a combination of intermodal services. ISTEA states that "it is the policy of the United States to develop a National Intermodal Transportation System . . . , one that shall consist of all forms of transportation in a unified *interconnected* manner" and support "the nation's preeminent position in international commerce."

This language indicates that the aim of the ISTEA authors is to protect and promote the commerce, and therefore the economic well-being, of the United States by increasing the effectiveness of intermodal systems. However, experience shows that we still have a way to go to make their vision a reality. We know that intermodalism thrives under a policy of regulatory freedom, but we are still struggling with how best to integrate government responsibility for developing basic highway and transit system infrastructure with private-sector investment in rail and other transportation modes. It is now appropriate for us to ask why—after 3 years of implementation experience—we are having a difficult time with this task. In light of its goals for intermodal transportation, is ISTEA working?

I think the answer is only a partial yes, and that's because the vision in ISTEA is much broader than it was in previous legislation. ISTEA establishes a more comprehensive and sometimes complex program that gives greater emphasis not only to intermodalism but also to clean air and energy efficiency goals. In fact, ISTEA proposes and invites more transportation change than can be realized under existing organizational structures. For example, both state and metropolitan planning organizations welcome the flexibility of ISTEA's funding programs, but the lack of full funding for ISTEA slows our ability to move beyond pure system maintenance to more innovative intermodal approaches.

ISTEA has been only modestly helpful in advancing the projects we're going to hear about this morning, in part because ISTEA has no rail policy, and partnerships between the private sector and government for intermodal projects are only beginning to be defined. Moreover, ISTEA does not provide much of a national policy framework for determining the advantages of mega-metropolitan projects such as the Alameda Corridor and how to give them adequate federal funding without giving short shrift to national priorities identified in other regions.

To realize the broader vision of ISTEA, we must be willing to forsake our earlier, narrower vision of modal-based transportation development and concentrate more on improving total freight and passenger flows. In the short run, it is more comfortable to keep using the same microcosmic map and to look at the world with modal blinders on, but in the long run, we simply don't have that luxury. The international marketplace is different today than it was 100 years ago, 50 years ago, or even 25 years ago, and we must provide transportation services that meet the demands of our ever-changing world. This is why Thomas Donohue of the American Trucking Associations (ATA), formerly a strong advocate of single-mode transportation, now speaks openly of the need for a new intermodal agenda with the railroad industry, realizing that both modes will become stronger through improved connectivity.

Thus, ISTEA authors recognized that times are changing and, although the path ahead is not as clear as we would like it to be, our commitment to a new direction in intermodal transportation must not falter.

The authors of ISTEA also recognized that we needed more information and clearer benchmarks to measure our progress. That is why the legislation emphasizes the development of transportation management plans with performance objectives and goals as central components. Nevertheless, our economic and competitive survival may depend in part on a more aggressive approach to transportation problem solving, and no level of detail in systems management planning will make us entirely comfortable with the actions we must take.

Our discussion this morning will focus on freight and passenger intermodal projects that demonstrate the kind of strategic thinking and cooperation required to establish new intermodal paradigms. Each of them bridges the gap between the conceptual and practical aspects of intermodalism.

Wrap-Up Remarks

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As these presentations have amply demonstrated, it is possible to turn vision into reality. It is hoped that hearing about these projects has given us the inspiration, motivation, and know-how to meet the challenges of intermodal project development. For those of us in the freight business, the challenges include the introduction of technologies that would foster greater automation in transfer systems, faster truck drayage and delivery, and increased development of rail services to meet both environmental and efficiency needs.

The opportunity to realize the vision set forth under ISTEA is very much with us. We must work together to fully capture that opportunity. We can do nothing about the past, and future opportunities are beyond our immediate grasp. In fact, now is the time to put on our collective thinking cap to form new relationships and map out new processes when important new concepts like Secretary Peña's proposal for a new National Transportation System (NTS) are taking shape.

There are several things we can do to bring ourselves closer to intermodal nirvana. We can actively create and support efforts to establish new federal policies for NTS maintenance and development, and we can reduce administrative and legislative gridlock and bickering on modal transportation issues. We should consider revamping transportation legislation and policy development at the federal and state levels. It may be time for the executive branch to take the initial organizational steps within the U.S. Department of Transportation to create a surface transportation administration that will forge well-crafted intermodal infrastructure links among our highway, railroad, and waterborne systems. The time is ripe for Congress to reorganize its committees to better reflect intermodal and multimodal considerations—in fact, we know that these issues are receiving serious review by the new House and Senate leadership. We can make the business community and general public more knowledgeable about agency and MPO efforts to improve intermodal projects and programs. We can promote more public-private partnerships in planning and building intermodal projects. (A good example is the private-sector alliance that Tom Donohue is trying to build with other intermodal partners.) And finally, we can use our intermodal expertise to create new transportation solutions designed to achieve clean air and energy conservation goals that make quality-of-life enhancements—as well as transportation improvement—the cornerstones of the new post-ISTEA intermodalism.