Although MPOs are all different, each one has had to address such issues as modeling, system expansion, finance, environmental analysis, air quality conformity, and several new issues brought about by ISTEA, including intermodalism, in planning its local transportation systems.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) progressed from a project to a systems approach, which produced the Metropolitan Transportation System (MTS). The emphasis changed from expansion to operations and management functions and finally, somewhat reluctantly, to management of certain operating functions and demonstration projects (e.g., the Pavement Management System, Surface Authority for Freeways and Expressways, Freeway Service Patrol, TRANSLINKS, and TravInfo). Thus, the MTC approach to system planning, which now focuses on operations, maintenance, and improvement of the MTS, has been the product of our particular brand of institutional growth and clearly demonstrates an intermodal orientation. It is the “I” of ISTEA, however, that raises the question of whether and how MPOs are to reengineer for intermodalism.

At ISTEA’s midpoint, how are we doing? Seen from a distance, MTC appears to be making good progress in addressing freight and intermodal issues. A closer look, however, shows that we continue to be challenged. For example, at a meeting sponsored by the Transportation Users Group (TUG), originally formed to help solve a Port of Oakland channel problem, the TUG chair, a retired American President Lines executive, characterized my summary of activities as incremental improvement when fundamental changes seem to be called for.

The four case studies to be described here today and similar efforts stimulated by ISTEA might be seen as representing only incremental progress but, nonetheless they are important in building the foundation for new partnerships. However, two major unresolved problems threaten to mask even this progress and may result in more fundamental changes. First, there are now more players, including freight and private-sector interests, who were not previously involved in MPO processes, but the transportation budget is essentially flat. Second, the planning and programming process takes too long to be relevant to our new private-sector partners. Our typical 5- to 10-year project lead time does not reconcile with the 1- to 5-year time frame common in private-sector planning. (Unfortunately, these two conditions are having a negative effect on progress—transportation deficits are handled by stretching out the delivery schedule, which in turn blocks funding of new projects.)
While working for Tom Larson, Don Camph argued that congressional demonstration projects have been used to circumvent these budget constraints and the long and complex planning processes. With a new Congress looking in every corner for reform, will these projects gain more credence as strategies for circumventing the planning process, or will old ideas (e.g., turning responsibility for transportation from federal government back to the state government) be resurrected to represent fundamental rather than incremental change and improvement?

If we are to assume that the initiatives of ISTEA represent the appropriate foundation for change, is reengineering MPOs as important as reengineering the larger transportation decision process? Reengineering the structure and orientation of MPOs may be necessary, but it may not be the only condition for successful planning.

The Intermodal Commission’s recommendations for reorganization in the U.S. Department of Transportation and Congress first come to mind. Michael Huerta recollects that the subject of effective partnerships emerged from the first intermodal conference in Irvine 2 years ago as perhaps the most fundamental key to intermodal improvement. The old surface transportation partnerships were found in the FHWA-state DOT fraternities and the FTA-city transit connections. In ISTEA, Congress attempted to marry the state and municipal planning organizations to force a move from unimodal to multimodal partnerships. The gaps in our intermodal transportation system are partly the product of our historic unimodal partnerships. The solution for this problem depends on the emerging multimodal partnerships and their ability to amass multisource funding packages.

I believe that the conventional wisdom, which says that the local orientation of MPOs may stand in the way of intermodal investments, is misdirected for two reasons. First, up to now the only multimodal view of transportation in metropolitan areas has been vested in MPOs. Only with the advent of ISTEA are the MPOs being given the leverage of flexible funding and more influence in their discussions with the states that have historically been characterized by a unimodal focus. Second, city-states performing as global competitors in world markets will force MPOs to realize that they must make decisions that encourage a healthy regional economy, even though that may not have been their original perspective.

The challenge is to continue to mine the new ideas for transportation planning that are emanating from wider participation in the planning process stimulated by ISTEA and to use these ideas to better manage and operate integrated systems. We should reform our intermodal planning and financing strategies to more closely match the private sector perception of a reasonable time frame. Given our current under-funded transportation programs and resulting extended delivery schedule, it will be no small feat to devise a process that ensures more timely delivery.