

Closing Remarks

Michael P. Huerta, *Office of Intermodalism, U.S. Department of Transportation*

Everyone is asking me about my impressions of this conference. My initial impression is that I am exhausted in terms of what we have heard, all the wonderful things that you have talked about, both in the public sessions and in private conversations. I would like to leave you with the theme that I touched on in my opening comments, and that was where we were and where we are.

Many of you have heard a small story that I would like to begin with about my mother. For those of you who have heard it, I promise you that this will be the last time. The story is that when I first came to take over as associate deputy secretary, my mother heard that I was going to be doing intermodal transportation. She asked me what intermodalism was. I told her that it was about connections, choices, and seamless movement, and her eyes began to glaze over. As I finished my little rap on what I was going to be doing in this position she basically said, "Well, as long as you are happy." I am going to come back to this in a few minutes.

If we look at where we were and how this industry has evolved, intermodalism, as we think of it, began in the 1980s, with the Staggers Rail Act, the Motor Carrier Act, and the shipping act. The combined effect of all these things was that we gained the ability to do things like through bills of lading, door-to-door seamless service, all of the things that we have been spending 3 days talking about and celebrating; this is where intermodalism has come. Well, customers responded, and they responded with great force. Why was that? It was because the economics, efficiencies, and products that were being offered in the form of intermodal transportation were compelling. My main point is that what started this was deregulation, and what deregulation means is removing barriers.

We learned more about customer response with the deregulation of the airline industry and, in 1991, with our surface transportation program in ISTEA. All of us are still struggling to come to grips with and figure out what our customers want and how we provide it to them. We will be doing our job when we give customers choices that are not artificially constrained. Mike Meyer has talked about how many of us have stressed market-driven planning and all of the things that we have heard about being responsive there, and that's what this is all about. Intermodalism gives us a tool to provide some of these choices. But the choices have to be related and relevant to what our customers want—that's how we make the case.

One thing that hammers this point home was part of a private conversation with Grace Hughes. We all heard earlier her story of the Marin Airporter. Grace said to me that she was feeling rather overwhelmed sitting here, hearing about these projects that were costing hundreds of millions or billions of dollars, hearing that that is what intermodalism is all about. What Grace said was that, fundamentally, intermodalism is just making it easy and providing something to our customers. Her point was that, in these multimillion and multibillion dollar projects, we do not want to lose sight of the fact that we are providing transportation service for the benefit of our customers. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money. It could simply be an application of good management or common sense.

We tend to despair over how much there is to be done and how much it is going to cost. I am reminded of the person who visits a gourmet restaurant and has a 10-course meal with all of the elaborate trimmings, sauces, and flourishes, and then complains that there was no salt on the table. Well, an awful lot has been accomplished, and we need to celebrate it. As George pointed out, Rodney Slater would say, "Find the good, and praise it." At the same time there is so much opportunity out there—we need to seize it and run with it.

What we are talking about is the theme we were discussing in this last session, the theme of continuous improvement. In industry it is called total quality management. In government we call it reinventing ourselves. But the principles of both of these are really very simple: put your customers first, cut red tape, remove barriers, and empower all of us to get the job done. Transportation affects each of us, all day long, every single day. Transportation is vital to America. Intermodalism gives us one means to provide our customers with responsive transportation. But let's not think that it is the only tool; it is only one of many tools that we have. We need to think about how we can be most responsive to our customers.

My mother does not care what intermodalism is as a concept, but she has a very clear idea of what she wants from transportation. Parenthetically, I will say I was relieved when I heard it was intermodal. She is just like all of our customers in the transportation system. So let us join together to listen to them and provide them with transportation that works—transportation that is seamless, transportation that provides choices, transportation that is coordinated and connected.

Now, Mike Meyer talked about us preaching to the choir. So I will conclude by addressing this congregation with one simple message: "Go forth and multiply, but do not just preach. Let's get the job done."