Citizen organizations have long been active in transportation and land use projects taking place in their communities. The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 and the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) have renewed the impetus and importance of citizen involvement. In communities from coast to coast, citizens are calling for investments in light rail as cost-effective and environmentally sound alternatives to highway expansion. The experience of citizen organizations that worked with their regional planning agencies to promote light rail is presented. Examples discussed are the New Jersey Hudson River Waterfront Project; the East-West Corridor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; “visioning” in the Washington, D.C., area; and experience in Fresno, California. The role of national organizations that act as important resources to local citizen groups is also discussed.

From New Jersey to California, citizens are becoming involved in the transportation decisions made by their metropolitan planning organizations and states—decisions that citizens understand not only affect their future mobility options but influence land use and the overall quality of life in their communities. Prompted by concerns about air pollution, congestion, sprawl, loss of open space, and social equity, citizens of all ages have started working with state and local planners and elected officials to help create a vision of a better future for their communities. As part of their efforts, in many cases, they are advocating investments in light rail as a sensible alternative to roadway expansion.

Federal laws enacted in recent years have given greater impetus to citizen involvement and calls for improved public transportation. The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 set deadlines by which metropolitan areas must achieve health-based air quality levels and have focused attention on the need to reduce mobile source emissions. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) enacted a year later requires increased citizen involvement in metropolitan and state transportation planning and gives communities unprecedented flexibility to use highway funds for investment in a broad range of transportation modes. Together, these laws provide a solid foundation for citizens to be active players in the transportation decisions made for their communities and states.

As citizens have become more engaged in these activities, they have turned to national organizations as resources to provide technical assistance, information about federal transportation laws, and other help. Organizations such as the Campaign for New Transportation Priorities, the National Association of Railroad Passengers, and the Surface Transportation Policy Project provide various types of information—such as the relative cost and energy and environmental benefits of different modes—and inform activists about what has worked in other communities.

Citizen Involvement in Planning Light Rail Systems in U.S. Cities

Harriet Parcells, Campaign for New Transportation Priorities
New Jersey Waterfront: Role of Citizen Involvement in Selection of Light Rail Over Alternatives

After years of analysis and input by New Jersey citizens and local officials, the New Jersey Transit Corporation (NJ Transit) in 1993 selected light rail, rather than a busway or monorail, as the "locally preferred alternative" to improve mobility in New Jersey's Hudson River Waterfront. In December 1994, NJ Transit announced the specific alignment that the light rail would follow. If all goes well, groundbreaking for the first phase of the project will occur in 1996 with initial service to begin in 1998.

The long path to approval of the light rail route is instructive in how informed, committed citizens can play a crucial role in the transportation solutions that ultimately will have a far-reaching impact on the quality of life in their communities.

The roots of transit planning for the waterfront date to 1985, when Governor Kean announced the state's support for a transit policy that included rail for the New Jersey Hudson River Waterfront. The governor's announcement received media coverage and editorial support from local newspapers. Citizen organizations active on transportation issues, such as the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers, applauded the announcement. From 1983 to 1989, despite prodding by transit activists and other citizens, NJ Transit took little action to develop a rail transit solution. NJ Transit's Waterfront Development Office appeared preoccupied with a dedicated busway solution and bus improvements that they termed an "interim" solution. Transit activists and many local officials, however, were vocal in their opposition to the bus solution, convinced that it would only worsen traffic congestion and pollution. In addition, they expressed fears that the interim solution would become the final solution.

Hoboken councilmember Tom Newman stated in 1988, "We expressed opposition to the interim busway because our fear is that interim is going to be permanent" (1, p. 8). There were also concerns that the bus solution would not help alleviate the region's serious air pollution problems. The president of the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers, Doug Bowen, noted that "a busway along the Palisades would create a diesel curtain around Hoboken" (1, p. 8). In 1990 environmentalists and local officials continued to express opposition to the bus proposal. "What the region really needs, they say, is a long-term solution, preferably a light rail system, to link developments on the revitalized waterfront" (2, p. 3).

Adding to the possible transit solutions for the waterfront, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, in summer 1989, announced support for a monorail that could be incorporated into its $2 billion turnpike widening project. Although the monorail was presented by its supporters as "complementing" light rail (embodying in the Governor's Mobility Plan), it was clear that, in fact, the two were competing options and in the end one, not both, would be pursued (3). By fall 1989, cost estimates of the proposed monorail were being questioned. A New Jersey newspaper stated that the proposed monorail linking the Meadowlands and the Hudson River Waterfront "could cost the state twice as much as the Secaucus developer has projected and would require construction of a larger tunnel through the Palisades than originally planned" (4).

In April 1991 the NJ Transit Waterfront Development Office was still pursuing the idea of a dedicated busway as an interim solution. Citizen organizations—which now included the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers, New Jersey Environmental Lobby, New Jersey Public Interest Research Group, Sierra Club, and others—as well as local officials such as Hoboken mayor Pat Fasculi, Weehauken mayor Richard Turner, and state senator Robert Menendez continued to oppose the bus solution and urge NJ Transit to pursue light rail as a cost-effective, environmentally sound alternative (5).

As NJ Transit examined alternatives under the alternatives analysis/draft environmental impact study (AA/DEIS) over a 3-year period, the agency was guided by a 70-member advisory committee made up of state and local officials, environmental groups, and other concerned citizens who set the goals of the study. Nine alternatives were studied. Of these, five featured light rail, one was an all-bus option, one was a monorail alternative, and two were required by the Federal Transit Administration (a no-build alternative and a transportation systems management alternative).

After extensive public input, light rail was selected as the locally preferred alternative. Throughout the lengthy process, citizen groups presented useful information on the economic and environmental benefits of light rail over the other alternatives that helped educate the public and contributed to the statewide debate. National organizations such as the National Association of Railroad Passengers and the Campaign for New Transportation Priorities were called on to act as resources to local citizen groups.

The light rail system selected is 20.5 mi long, with the first 11 mi extending from Hoboken Terminal south to Bayonne and west to Jersey City. Some of the federal funds for the light rail will come from ISTE, which earmarked some $634 million for the Northern New Jersey Urban Core project (6).

The project may be implemented as a pioneering "super-turnkey" development, according to Frank Wil-
son, New Jersey Transportation Commissioner. Under such a turnkey development, a private contractor would be responsible for the design, construction, and operation of the light rail line for an unspecified period. The New Jersey project could become the first such super-turnkey development in the United States, although other cities such as Chicago and New York are also examining the approach. In addition, citizens and others have urged NJ Transit to pursue a low-floor light rail car for this system as well as other systems under consideration in New Jersey. Low-floor light rail is being used in cities throughout Europe; in the United States, Portland, Oregon, has selected low-floor for its new order of light rail cars, and Chicago, Boston, and Toronto are moving in the same direction (6).

Citizen transportation organizations and activists continue to monitor carefully the development of the Hudson River Waterfront light rail project. They remain actively involved in transportation planning and project decisions on a broader scale, both at the state and regional levels, advocating light rail where it makes sense (e.g., Newark-Elizabeth light rail), as well as other forms of public transportation.

**CITIZENS, LABOR, AND BUSINESS COMMUNITY PROMOTION OF LIGHT RAIL IN MILWAUKEE**

Since 1990 citizen organizations such as the New Transportation Alliance and labor organizations such as the Amalgamated Transit Union in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, have been advocating improved public transportation, especially light rail, in Milwaukee’s East-West Corridor. More recently, the business community weighed in on transportation by forming in May 1994 the Alliance for Future Transit, a coalition of 26 major Milwaukee-area businesses. All of these groups recognize that the Milwaukee area’s transportation system is at a critical juncture and believe that greater investment in mass transit, especially light rail, must be part of the solution to ensure the region’s future economic vitality.

Transportation alternatives for the East-West Corridor in Milwaukee have been examined for many years. Potential light rail alignments have been a prominent feature of the transit options under consideration, with strong support from the public.

In January 1995 transportation alternatives analysis for the East-West Corridor resumed in earnest. The East-West Corridor transportation study will combine various transit alternatives that have been under study for the corridor with the highway improvement options for I-94 that have also been examined.

Under the transportation study, detailed light rail and highway lane alignments will be presented, as well as the benefits, costs, and impacts of each alternative. Ten alternatives are under consideration. Light rail options have been narrowed down to two alignments, both starting in Glendale and extending south to Milwaukee’s central business district and from downtown, extending west to the county line using city streets and existing railroad right of way. A 5-mi spur along Fond du Lac Avenue was added to the light rail alignments that has strong potential to encourage new development and to provide access for inner-city workers to an expanding job market in the outlying suburban areas (7, p. 2).

At two public hearings held in February 1994 by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, support for light rail was voiced repeatedly. Light rail supporters included business representatives, labor, transportation activists, environmental groups, and minorities. Citizens indicated that they preferred combined bus and light rail improvements over bus-only improvements (7, p. 2). The AA/DEIS is targeted for completion in August 1995.

As with many major transportation investment projects, legislators representing urban areas and those from the suburban areas often differ as to what constitutes the best transportation solution. Light rail in Milwaukee is no exception, with many suburban Waukesha legislators opposed to the light rail investment. In June 1995 the Wisconsin legislature, which changed leadership after the November 1994 elections, took action, as part of its work on the state budget, to eliminate the light rail options from the alternatives analysis. It is unclear at this writing what light rail’s status will be when the budget is made final.

National organizations such as the Campaign for New Transportation Priorities have provided helpful information, when asked, to local groups in Milwaukee.

**A NEW APPROACH ADVOCATED BY CITIZENS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.**

In the Washington, D.C., region, citizens and environmental, public health, and consumer organizations joined together in 1992 to form the Washington Regional Network for Livable Communities (WRN), whose purpose is to provide a unified voice for “transportation investments and urban land forms that are efficient, promote communities and protect the land, air, environment and quality of life in the National Capital Region” (8, p. 1). The Chesapeake Bay Foundation acted as the catalyst in bringing the groups together.

Responding to the enhanced citizen involvement mandates of ISTEA, Washington’s regional metropolitan planning agency, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, sought greater input from citizens. WRN became an effective voice in presenting
ideas to the regional planning agency’s transportation planning board (TPB). The TPB amended its bylaws to establish a public comment period at the beginning of its meetings, as requested by WRN, and to allow the TPB to call special “briefing” meetings of the public on key issues before the regional planning agency. In addition, the TPB formed a citizens advisory committee (8).

In 1992 the WRN held a 2-day meeting at Catholic University of citizen groups and activists to brainstorm on a new transportation and land use vision for the Washington, D.C., region. Recommendations that grew out of the meeting were issued in a document titled A New Approach: Integrating Transportation and Development in the National Capital Region. The document was reviewed by several hundred national, state, and local organizations and the recommendations further refined and detailed. The “New Approach” was presented to the TPB in November 1992 (8).

The “New Approach” pursues three major goals:

1. Invest in the existing transportation system and use existing road and transit infrastructures more efficiently;
2. Make transit, bicycle, and pedestrian investments a much higher priority; and
3. Develop new residential and business developments around urban and town centers.

Included in Goal 2 is investment in light rail. “The WRN-revised plan emphasizes light rail, express bus and commuter rail upgrading” (9). The document includes a one-page “Primer on Light Rail” and recommends construction of various light rail lines in the Washington, D.C., area (9).

WRN continues to be an effective voice on transportation and land use issues in the Washington area; it provides regular input to the TPB on transportation projects under consideration and speaks for a more sustainable vision for the region.

**Pavement Solution Chosen by Fresno**

Fresno, California, provides an example of city whose leadership decided to pursue a traditional pavement solution, opting last year for construction of a new multilane freeway, SR-168, instead of the light rail proposal endorsed by many local citizens.

Citizen action in Fresno began when citizens saw that a majority of funds from Measure C, a half-cent sales tax approved by voters in 1986 (which voters believed would be used to finance the repair of deteriorating roads in the city and county), were instead targeted for construction of a new north-south freeway. The proposed six-lane freeway, connecting Fresno with neighboring Clovis, would cut a wide path through local neighborhoods, require the taking of many homes and businesses, and seriously erode the quality of life for those who remained (10).

Hundreds of Fresno residents appeared at Fresno City Council meetings to voice opposition to the freeway. A citizens organization, Sane Transportation Alternatives for Neighborhood Defense (STAND), was formed to advocate mass transit, light rail in particular, as a sound alternative to the highway. Volunteers from the organization collected more than 1,200 signatures on petitions expressing opposition to the proposed freeway. Other local groups such as the Sierra Club (Tehiptite chapter) and the San Joaquin Greens joined the battle (10). The groups advocated investment in a multimodal transportation system, including light rail as an alternative that would better address the mobility needs of the community, enhance neighborhoods, and contribute to a cleaner environment. Citizens argued that Fresno had the opportunity to abandon plans for 9 mi of unwanted freeway and build a 30-mi light rail network instead.

For the first time, important voices in the Fresno community were examining the potential of a different route to mobility—light rail. The *Fresno Bee* in a January 1993 editorial called the “dismissiveness about light rail ... galling.” The newspaper asked, “Why haven’t we started planning [a system] yet? We may very well wish we had in another decade” (10).

In 1994, however, despite citizens’ visions of a future based on improved public transportation, a majority of the Fresno City Council and Board of Supervisors voted to approve construction of the new freeway. Citizen activists in Fresno oppose the direction being pursued but continue to attend meetings of their regional planning agency and stay informed and involved in transportation issues.

**Conclusions**

Citizens from coast to coast are becoming involved in the transportation and land use planning and decision making in their communities and states and providing valuable input to the projects under consideration. Greater investment in light rail is an integral part of the vision that many citizen organizations advocate, as illustrated in this paper. The views and information contributed by committed citizens groups has helped frame the debate and educate the broader community and elected officials on the economic, environmental, and social benefits of investing in public transportation. Recently enacted federal laws such as ISTEA have given new impetus to citizen involvement and, although it has
taken some adjustment by state and regional planners, there appears to be a consensus that there are clear benefits from having citizens at the table when decisions are being made about the future mobility options and quality of life in their communities.

REFERENCES