

citizen participation and environmental considerations in transportation planning

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The task for those in transportation is to furnish safe and efficient transportation, well designed and planned far enough ahead to allow for future overloads. We are all aware that deficiencies are becoming greater, costs are spiraling, and traffic loads are increasing. At the same time, the public is showing increasing concern for the environment and ecological matters.

A major attempt should be made to analyze those environmental factors that are involved in the building of highways and in the use of the internal combustion engine—factors that, rightly or wrongly, have aroused public concern to the extent that it is impeding the development of transportation programs.

There is no definition of "environment" and "ecology" that satisfies everyone. One's concept of the environment is what it means to oneself, one's family, and one's way of life. Environment means those things that affect our daily lives physically, aesthetically, emotionally, and economically. It may be concern about something as fundamental as enough oxygen in the air or as trivial as annoyance at a neighbor who does not cut his lawn.

Ecology, in simple terms, is the study of living things and their environments. Defining human ecology always involves personal views about the environment.

I have been a conservationist for a long time, but today I call myself a "conservative conservationist." By that I mean that I still like our world but I do not think we are doing well by it. We are going to have to change our approach. It cannot be done overnight, for many involved things are essential, and changing or eliminating them too quickly could have disastrous results.

What does all of this have to do with public attitudes? These things and many others are inherent in public attitudes—a mixture of real concerns, of helpless commitment to our industrial system, of irrationalities, and of a great deal of selfishness. Just about everyone wants to have his cake and to eat it too. We deplore the increasingly bad effects of industrialization, but we still, for the most part, refuse to give up any of its benefits.

Do you roll up old newspapers to make fireplace logs? Do you make compost of your garbage? Would it be practicable for you to ride a bicycle to work? For most, the answer is no, simply because our time commitments to our specialized work in an industrial nation will not allow us to do those things. Perhaps they may become necessary some time in the future if we continue to add 3 million vehicles each year to our traffic.

In addition to this mixture of fears and attitudes is the universal insecurity of the human race. Americans seem to be worse than others, perhaps because the fluidity of our society makes us more status conscious. We compensate in an infinite number of ways. Some of us paint pictures, some make money, some build highways, some write books, and some evangelize. Our compensations, and those things we need to support them, get all mixed up in the ego with our need to feel important or at least secure.

An unfamiliar thing becomes a threat. It can be a freeway or a dam or a power plant or a new factory. When people feel threatened, their reaction is to fight or flee a confrontation. Whether or not it is based on irrational fears, resistance to change is a trait common to many people. They cannot be sold on the basis of the benefit-cost ratio or the economic advantages to the community from improved transportation. They trade off prospects of increased property values for retention of the status quo. They realize that progress is fine for the realtor and the businessman, but the homeowner who is fairly well off in his present situation will get nothing but increased taxes, congestion, and all the other evils of progress, i.e., a deteriorated personal environment.

In the past century, communities actually came to pitched battles over which one would get the railroad. Today they are fighting to keep the freeway out of their communities.

The public hearing process is supposed to allay all of these fears. If you think it does, you are dreaming. As a public relations instrument, the hearing has long been outmoded. The highway department can still use it as a place to display its wares, but, unfortunately, the opposition also recognizes it as a place to show theirs.

Studies have to be started years before the hearing. If the routing is controversial, the word gets around quickly and the opposition begins to shape up. Those who have sincere objections, the evangelists, the fearful, the selfish, and the environmental and ecology buffs join forces and make up most of the audience at the hearing. Those who have confidence in the plan will be out playing golf. Those who will profit by the new facility will be in their offices figuring out how to make the most profit.

Nor is the hearing a very democratic process. It is more like a court trial where the evidence is heard and the decision is made almost simultaneously. And the public is apt to think the jury was rigged.

California is using a new approach. Instead of letting the community choose up sides during the long process between the beginning of the study and the hearing, the state is, in effect, holding a first hearing at the point of project conception.

California has been a very troubled state. All the attitudes I mentioned and a good many others are present in exaggerated form. Routes long in the planning program are meeting so much opposition that they have had to be canceled. Getting any kind of adoption is increasingly difficult.

The new approach in California of shifting the decision-making process farther forward is the result of several years of effort to find a better means of coping with opposition. Official procedure now is to seek to have local officials at the outset sign a study agreement emanating from a request by either local officials or the state agency.

At that time, the proposed project is opened with a well-publicized public meeting. The point is emphasized that the agreement is only to study and that the study may recommend no action.

If the agreement is signed, the regular study procedure commences as a cooperative action between the state and the local officials. The latter are urged to appoint also a citizens' advisory committee of rational, noncommitted representatives of the community. Collection of preliminary information for the draft environmental statement also begins. One district has carried this even farther by collecting preliminary

community environmental factors prior to the study meeting to make the public study agreement meeting more meaningful.

The advantages of this approach are apparent. From the beginning no one is committed to any action, and that goes a long way toward stilling community fears. The agreement meeting for all practicable purposes thus serves as a public hearing years before any route adoption must be effected. In the interim there is plenty of time to air the issues thoroughly in as many neighborhood meetings as are asked for and by other means of communication. Everyone who wants to has a chance to make his feelings known long before a decision is imminent and thus to feel he has had a part in the decision. When most citizens are apprised of the issues this early and their fears are allayed, the dissidents have difficulty in attracting support.

The no-action possibility is also important. Of course, federal instructions at present allow for negative decisions, and some states also have such provisions. But publicizing it can be a very disarming device. The no-action possibility changes the emphasis so that the citizen may say, "Maybe we do need this project." The approach at the study meeting must also be on whether the project is needed and has merit. In contrast, a route-adoption hearing says a freeway is needed and here are some choices on where we want to put it.

The advisory committee is also important. The community must know who these people are and that they are involved in the decision. In California, when these committees have been brought into the process early enough, they have veered from attitudes of opposition to cooperation after they began looking at the problem from inside.

Selecting committee members from the local power structure should be avoided at all costs. If it is not, the predictable result is the formation of a second but unofficial citizens' group with which the highway department will have great difficulty communicating. The committee must be composed of intelligent members whose character and personal interests are impeccable from the community's viewpoint.

Another advantage of California's study agreement procedure is the additional lead time given the community to adjust to a freeway if one is decided on by the study. Naturally, no final route can be selected at this stage, but the community has several more years to get used to the idea.

Citizen participation will not always be the answer. Rapidly changing or expanding communities and highly urbanized areas will always present problems. For the latter, California has carried the procedure a step farther with its transportation corridor studies. These seek to establish the most practicable transportation routes through heavily developed areas in corridors that contain dozens of square miles. The potential route adoptions may be many miles in length, and several communities may be involved. Possible decisions might be that several more freeways are needed or that no more are needed at all because development has already exceeded practicable limits.