

THE NEED FOR EVALUATION

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ALTHOUGH planning is not an exact science, it does have a defined methodology that suggests that several basic steps are necessary for adequate planning. First, the planner must identify his client and determine the client's goals; second, the planner must realistically determine whether the client's goals can be accomplished at a reasonable cost; and third, once the product or facility has been developed, the planner must evaluate it to see if it actually meets the desires of the client. This is especially true in the case of product and service offerings, since they can be continually changed or modified to make them more effective. Oftentimes the role of the planner and operator is distorted, especially when the major goal may be the vying for state and federal funds.

The political leaders in an urban area work to formulate goals and policies for mass transit in their specific communities. From these goals, planners attempt to develop strategies and facilities that can be implemented by the transit operators. The overall effectiveness of the effort can be determined by evaluation measures that indicate how well the goals are being accomplished. The state and federal grantors are primarily interested in facilitating these efforts by providing funds and ensuring their effective use.

In practice, however, local policy-makers often recognize their unfamiliarity with mass transportation and turn to planners and operators for direction on setting goals. Planners, on the other hand, in their search for hard-to-define goals and objectives that should be provided by the policy-makers, have turned their attention to widely applicable "service standards". At times these service standards have been used blindly. If goals are stated, they frequently are formulated to satisfy funding requirements and are very broad and general.

Operators faced with rapidly rising deficits, declining ridership, and lack of specific direction from local authorities often feel that continuing the existing operating procedures is the safest course to follow, especially since more and more attention is being given to a service orientation for transit similar to police and fire services.

The user in his quest for better service has had difficulty in making the local governmental authorities, or the transit operator, respond to his needs. The local citizen or potential user is now requested to pay for services that he often does not have access to.

State and federal grantors are beginning to realize that each community has different needs and that specific funding programs frequently stimulate transit systems that maximize the inflow of grants rather than the provision of service to the community. Consequently, grantors are increasingly turning their emphasis to the use of block grants, where local agencies will have more flexibility in the allocation of funds. Unfortunately, unless the planning and evaluation procedures in urban areas are brought into better perspective, the increased funding flexibility may produce more confusion than effective solutions to urban transportation problems.

Until the early 1960s responsibility for urban mass transportation was left primarily to private enterprise. Private ownership provided ground transportation in the majority of urban areas. As revenues dropped and costs increased, many privately owned mass transit companies discontinued service. Urban communities often purchased these discontinued private operations and continued them by subsidizing the service. As municipalities purchased private operations, they soon discovered that they did not have sufficient revenues to provide the services that they thought were needed. They also discovered that public ownership did not, in and of itself, solve the financial crisis.

As soon as funding from the federal government was available for public transportation, there was a rapid increase in the number of publicly owned transit systems and thus a rapid decline in privately owned systems. Many local governments felt that, if federal moneys could be brought in to purchase new equipment to replace the old or worn-out rolling stock, or if federal moneys were available to purchase additional equipment to expand service, many of their problems with public transportation would be solved. However, the local communities found that this was not the case. Large operating subsidies were required to keep the systems operating. Thus, the local governments often found that the evaluation procedures used to establish, to continue, or to expand local public transportation had led to a large increase in local funds to support public transportation. As the amount of local funds required increased, ridership decreased. Public ownership, new equipment, and/or expanded service did not, in or of themselves, cause an increase in ridership.

The local governments began to take one of three approaches to solving the operating deficit problem. One approach was to attempt to seek new ways to increase the service and thus, it was hoped, increase ridership. The second approach was to decrease services, thereby curtailing expenditures. The third approach was to return to the federal government and request that operating subsidies be provided in addition to the capital grant subsidies. None of the three approaches has been successful to date.

As the federal government became deeply involved in funding multimillion-dollar urban mass transit projects, little attention seemed to be given to developing methodologies for evaluating public transportation services. In the past, local governments were not concerned with evaluation. Because for many years public transportation systems had been primarily in the private sector, the local governments were not concerned with their operations as long as they adhered to governing regulations. The main criterion for evaluation was that established by the private sector—that is, economic viability.

There were minor attempts to establish broad uniform guidelines in planning public transportation systems, but no uniform standards were universally adopted from one system to another. Each system was evaluated by its benefits—if they could be defined. As various systems became unprofitable and public ownership became the trend, economic viability could no longer be used as the sole criterion for evaluation. If it was used, most systems were unsuccessful. If economic viability cannot be used as a criterion for evaluation, then other means must be developed to evaluate public transportation.

With the increasing trend toward public ownership and the use of public funds for subsidies, it is time that evaluation procedures be established for current operating systems as well as proposed systems. A meaningful evaluation of public transportation must occur at all levels of government.

This conference was organized specifically to identify steps required to give direction to the urban public transportation planning process, increase its effectiveness, and develop methods for evaluating public transportation. Invitations were intentionally sent to individuals with widely differing backgrounds and responsibilities. Planners, federal and state grantors, bus and taxi operators, transit authority members, and policy-makers were invited. In addition to the balance between functional areas, every effort was made to balance the professional background by including engineers, planners, managers, marketers, and social scientists.

The first day of the conference, speakers presented the perspectives and needs of transit authority boards, planners, operators, and grantors. The conference then divided into six workshops to seek approaches for giving direction to the urban public transportation planning process, increasing its effectiveness, and developing methods for evaluating public transportation. Each workshop was provided with a list of questions to demonstrate specific problem areas that are especially acute to each of the areas. The objectives of the conference were

1. To provide all attendees with a better understanding of the perspectives and needs of the users, transit authority boards, planners, operators, and grantors;
2. To identify current approaches being used by each of these groups to evaluate performance;

3. To identify steps that need to be taken to provide information necessary to plan, design, operate, finance, and effectively evaluate public transportation; and
4. To identify research projects, complete with work statements, that are needed to increase the effectiveness of each of the groups as they interact to fulfill their respective roles.