

WORKSHOP 5: THE USER'S PERSPECTIVE

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THIS workshop had perhaps the most sharply focused of all the workshop topics in that it dealt specifically with the user's perspective. The acknowledged importance of this perspective was amply demonstrated during the conference by the various workshops dealing with the grantor's role, the policy-maker's role, the planner's role, and the operator's role, each emphasizing a focus on understanding and meeting consumer needs in addition to the other relevant dimensions of their respective viewpoints. Because this conference was designed for the purpose of identifying research needs for evaluating public transportation, it is apparent that a consumer orientation represents a newly emerging approach to transportation planning and evaluation that suffers at present from substantial knowledge gaps. The writings of Orski, Tomazinis, and Webber serve to illustrate the basic issues involved and the need for increased emphasis on consumer perspectives and broad community goals in the planning, design, and evaluation of public transportation systems.

Orski has presented some conclusions reached at an international meeting of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris (1). He states that the new conceptual approach to transportation planning is one giving increased emphasis to human values as well as the social and economic goals of the urban development. Engineering and economic efficiency no longer serves as the only guiding principle for transportation investment decisions. Instead, these technical factors must be weighed against the social, economic, environmental, and aesthetic needs of urban residents, including those of personal mobility, accessibility to urban opportunities, comfort and convenience, clean air, pleasant surroundings, preservation of neighborhoods, and urban diversity.

Implicit in Orski's statement is the acknowledgment that transportation is not an end in itself but serves as a means to a set of desirable social ends. The basic objective of transportation system investment, therefore, is not just to move people but to improve the social well-being of an area's residents.

The role of public transportation in facilitating the provision of essential social services was stated by Tomazinis in 1971 (2). Tomazinis depicted mass transit as constituting a social service delivery system wherein economy and efficiency of operation were relevant only with respect to the way that reasonable transportation alternatives were provided to meet more basic social needs of all population groups. To provide for the social service needs of these various groups, the administration and decision-making processes within the system were said to require substantial inputs from a broad constituency, including community leaders, technical experts, and consumers.

Taking an approach similar to those of the two previous authors, Webber (3) cited three reasons for the inadequacies of existing methods of transportation system evaluation:

1. Transportation investments were viewed primarily as capital investments in physical facilities rather than as investments in transport services.
2. The function of transportation facilities was seen as connecting geographic places rather than connecting people with essential social service opportunities.
3. The primary test of transportation system appropriateness was least cost rather than the largest output of benefits.

The widely shared acceptance of these attitudes toward transportation system planning and evaluation has led transportation planners to operate as though social value is a characteristic residing within the facilities themselves. The conflict, as Webber

states it, is that we know that the real utility of transportation derives from improved linkages between buyers and sellers, recreation consumers and recreation resources, community services and people who require those services, employers and employees, etc. Yet, when the merits of public transportation services have been appraised, we have seen criteria applied that dealt solely with narrow performance measures (e.g., travel time, departure frequency, schedule reliability) of the transportation facilities themselves.

As a simple means of overcoming this narrow focus, Webber suggests that we reconceptualize the nature of a transportation system by viewing it as a dynamic community service rather than as an inanimate facility. The relevant questions in transportation system evaluation then become: What socially desirable services does the system provide? Which groups of people are able to take advantage of these services? What are the consequences of this service delivery?

More importantly, in identifying the shortcomings of existing transportation systems and developing more socially responsive systems of the future, we can then ask: What social service linkages should be provided to meet various consumer needs?

The user's perspective workshop addressed many of these issues during the conference. Among the disciplines and professions represented by the workshop participants were engineers, planners, social scientists, transit operators, university professors, consultants, and professional staff members of transportation agencies. This diversity of workshop composition served to bring out many conflicting viewpoints during the discussion meetings.

The major issue that emerged in the workshop involved the identification of appropriate dimensions of consumer satisfaction and ways to measure the responsiveness of transportation service to consumer requirements. Two basic viewpoints were expressed.

One viewpoint dealt almost exclusively with transportation system attributes. Transportation service quality was expressed in terms of variables such as fare, number of transfers, travel time, walking distance, ride comfort, and schedule reliability. Public transportation users were included in this viewpoint in terms of the amount of travel they would consume given the status of these transportation system attributes. In other words, travel demand is the definitive measure of the degree to which transportation services meet user needs. High levels of transit ridership thus serve to indicate acceptable levels of transportation service. Low ridership, on the other hand, is an indicator of undesirable transit system attributes from the user's perspective. Under this viewpoint, research needs involve topics such as how to measure elasticities of travel demand with respect to the transit system attributes, how to identify different degrees of demand elasticity among various types of users, and how to identify those transportation service improvements that will cause the greatest diversion of travel consumers from the auto mode to a transit mode.

The second viewpoint expressed the need to regard transportation as a linkage between people and activities. Because there is no inherent value to consumers in transportation system attributes themselves, the evaluation of public transportation service to a community would be improved by consideration of the consequences of transportation linkages (or their absence) on the lives of community residents. This viewpoint takes the position that travel demand as measured by actual ridership does not adequately measure community service—nor does it guarantee that all segments of the community are equitably served. Users and potential users are characterized by their basic needs and desires, their physical and economic resources for satisfying these needs, and their tastes and preferences regarding acceptable transportation alternatives.

Both of the viewpoints expressed have their respective merits. The second viewpoint has the virtue of being closer to the essential nature of transportation linkages to community residents, whereas the first viewpoint embodies the set of choice variables actually available to transportation professionals in planning, designing, and operating public transportation systems. Obviously there is a great research need to effectively translate social, economic, political, and environmental community objectives into transportation service objectives that have significance and are attainable

by transit planners, designers, and operators. In recognition of this, the user's perspective workshop combined both viewpoints in many of the research project statements and identified topics to specifically deal with the issues of translation of community objectives into meaningful information for transit professionals as well as the translation of transportation system characteristics into meaningful information for community decision-makers.

Substantial agreement among the workshop participants was found in the discussion of user identification and information requirements for system evaluation. It was concluded that people cannot be simply categorized as either users or nonusers of public transportation. Instead, as people's personal characteristics and circumstances vary, so do their transportation requirements. In the past, the identification and subsequent treatment of users has been limited to labels such as "riders" or "fares", with little regard to their individual needs. Because of this narrow view of transit consumers, transit systems have developed with barriers sufficient to preclude their effective utilization by some groups of potential consumers (4) and have succeeded in providing high-quality service only to employees with work trip destinations in central business districts. Recent legislative action such as Section 16A of the Urban Mass Transportation Act and Section 301(b) of the 1973 Federal Aid Highway Act indicate increased concern for providing public transportation services that can be effectively used by such heretofore unrecognized groups as the elderly and handicapped.

The second area of substantial agreement, perhaps conditioned by the theme of the conference, was the recognition of the inadequacy of present techniques of transportation system evaluation. Each of the conference workshops expressed the need for greater levels of detail concerning transportation system consequences as evaluation and decision-making inputs. A research topic proposed by the workshop carried this point further by recognizing that evaluations of proposed transportation improvements are made on the basis of their anticipated consequences. Because of the numerous errors of measurements, specification, and forecasting that are introduced in this process, there is no assurance that the anticipated consequences will actually be achieved. There is an obvious need, therefore, to monitor and reevaluate the performance of such systems so that appropriate modifications can be made to ensure desirable levels of service delivery.

To conclude this summary on a personal note, I was disappointed that the conference did not give greater emphasis to the problems of the transportation-disadvantaged (i.e., the poor, the elderly, the handicapped, and others without access to a suitable transportation mode). Much of the workshop discussions centered around issues of labor problems, profitability of transit properties, and modal choice. The need for mobility and the difference it can make in the quality of people's lives is of such major importance that public transportation for those without the choice to use automobiles ought to be viewed as an essential social service rather than as a commodity in the public market. In contrast to resource allocations presently made for investments such as community health programs, which are virtually accepted as being essential, public transportation still is required to prove its merits (unfortunately solely in terms of user payments versus operating costs). Ironically, transportation is being increasingly acknowledged as an essential component of social service programs. Since traditional public transit is oriented toward work trips and profits, we have seen a proliferation of efficient, narrowly focused transit programs come into being, funded and operated by social service agencies for the exclusive use of their clients. These inadequate programs have been forced into existence because of the failure of federal, state, and local transportation agencies to meet their responsibility for ensuring that all citizens have a viable transportation alternative.

It is hoped that meeting the needs of transit users as well as those who should be users but are not equitably served at present will emerge as a national priority in the near future. In recent testimony before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging (5), William Bell and I presented results of 3 years of study (6, 7, 8) and suggested legislative action to help correct this deficiency. The research topics identified by the user workshop and the overall spirit of this conference create some optimism that forthcoming legislative improvements will be taken advantage of by more knowledgeable

transportation professionals and that future legislation and other public policy will be guided by information provided to political decision-makers.

Following are the research projects developed by Workshop 5:

- 5-1. Measuring the Quality of Public Transportation Service
- 5-2. Identification of Public Transportation Consumer Groups
- 5-3. Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Transportation Systems
- 5-4. Translation of Mobility Requirements of User Groups Into Specific Transportation Service Characteristics
- 5-5. Potential for Diversion of Automobile Commuters to Public Transportation
- 5-6. Information System Requirements of Transportation System Consequences
- 5-7. Assessing Benefits of a Public Transportation System for Users and the Community at Large
- 5-8. Demand Elasticities of User Groups as Related to Service Attributes
- 5-9. Measurement of Convenience for Auto Access

A detailed description of each research project is given in Part IV of this book. The top-ranked projects selected by this workshop were

- 5-1. Measuring the Quality of Public Transportation Service
- 5-2. Identification of Public Transportation Consumer Groups

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