

# Local Role in Programming

*Milton Pikarsky, Chicago Regional Transportation Authority*

I will discuss a current case history concerning programming of public transportation at perhaps its utmost effectiveness. It comes from the Regional Transportation Authority for the 6-county area of northeastern Illinois. Coordinating public transportation in this area is a challenging job. We started with one of the best developed metropolitan transit systems in the world, excellent commuter rail services, and some outstanding suburban bus companies.

We also have a great variety in rider needs, family living styles, and patterns of occupational and residential life. Some of the 6 counties are more rural than urban in their nature. On the other hand, our industrial plants and corporate offices are widely spread, and some workers must travel great distances to get to their jobs. A proper balance of urban and suburban interests is an important factor in all our programming.

Our Chicago Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) is required, by its statute, to hold public hearings in each of the 6 counties to develop an annually updated 5-year program and budget. We shall do that for the first time in June. The transit input meetings in which we are not involved will be helpful in establishing the key projects to be placed on the public hearing agenda.

I think that the role of the local agency in programming is the most meaningful one. There are several reasons why.

First, the local agency is the closest to the service to be performed. The success or failure of that service is crucial to the local agency—even, at times, to its survival. Second, the local agency best understands the environment in which the end results of the granting agency must be accomplished. Third, if programs fail because proper procedures are not followed, it will be the local agency that is blamed.

The higher level agency providing the grant is looking for an end product—a result—that is uniform throughout the country or the state. And the programming must really be done where these dollars are converted to this objective.

The few conflicts and tensions that do arise among federal, state, and local agencies are generally concerned with the interpretation of guidelines. The funding agency is responsible for providing guidelines that are relevant to state and national issues. Within those guidelines, the funding agency must review and approve programming procedures of the local agency. I advocate adherence to the fundamental federal and

state performance objectives, provided that flexibility as to how that objective is attained in each local instance is given equal recognition.

To illustrate: The goal of a guideline is to provide the handicapped passenger access to public transportation. Every responsible local service accepts that premise and everyone wishes to provide that access.

Local programmers and engineers are best equipped to determine the most efficient and safe method of attaining the objective on their own systems. The operating modifications and construction specifications to do this may vary among areas. To pinpoint these specifications in the guidelines is often to prolong the completion time and foster economic waste.

The local agency should avoid any tendency to be so eager for a particular type of funding that it allows itself to get boxed into unrealistic and unworkable guidelines. However, local programmers have the responsibility to conduct continuing analyses of how their programming is working out in implementation and how well the end-result objectives of the grant are being met.

The overall goal of the funding agencies should be to increase the level of analysis being carried out by the local agency and the consistency of feedback as the programming proceeds.

What are the responsibilities of the local agency in the performance of its role?

First, and most important, the local agency must provide a soundly analyzed program. All possible alternatives, not just one magic formula, should be considered. Advocates of each alternative should have an opportunity to present their arguments. Programming acts as a checkpoint on planning. It applies resources to plans that have been made in an unconstrained framework. The programmer should carry no personal or implied responsibility to the planner to prove his work. For this reason, I feel it best to make planning and programming separate departmental functions.

Second, the local agency bears a responsibility to be actively involved in the formulation of the national and state guidelines. Any oversights in policies promulgated by funding agencies cannot be recognized until they are pointed out. The specialized knowledge and case experiences of the local agency provide the only way the federal or state agency has of recognizing the variations that must be accommodated. The local agency is the proper focal point for decision-making on the nature and time phasing of the program in that area. And the local agency is where the inputs of 4 major audiences can be most readily collected and analyzed.

First, there are the political leaders. They are not only acutely sensitive to the needs and desires of their constituents but also aware of political realities, of what projects can and cannot be accomplished within the existing local climate.

Second, there is the transportation administrator. This office has the resources to analyze the changing needs of users of the service because, in essence, that is the total business of the office. The transportation administrator ensures objectivity in the evaluation of impact on the rider, the potential rider, and those who never ride at all. I call this latter, highly important group transit independents, but we are not so independent of them, for they usually cast the majority vote on a question such as the creation of a regional transportation authority. They must be led to see the benefits of public transportation to them.

Third, there is the programmer who must have the most professional attitude of all. He or she must look thoroughly at the various alternatives without being a prejudiced advocate of any one and remain cool under political pressure, refusing to be swayed by it. The programmer must also respect political input as a part of citizen involvement and not regard it as political interference.

Fourth, there are the citizens. If a faulty program is being implemented, citizens are the last link in the chain. It is the responsibility of the local agency to keep citizens informed in order that they can express themselves, should they do desire, as early as possible. This is one of the major reasons why the local agency needs an information office that knows how to meet the needs of community media.

When it comes down to it, then, the local agency is the most responsible for whether the program is workable, efficient, acceptable, and effective in the attainment of the funding agency's overall goals. If the program is good, the chances are that it will

survive despite any changes in elected officials in the local area.

I am particularly conscious of the importance of coordinated local programming in the tremendous assignments facing the Chicago Regional Transportation Authority. RTA itself must remember to respect the superior local knowledge of local programming.

The job of the RTA is to coordinate the programs of component transit agencies and districts—the South Suburban District, the Great Lakes District, the West Suburban District, and the Chicago Transit Authority—all with well-established systems and all in constant communication with the communities that they serve.

The importance of local knowledge is one too easily forgotten in these days of growth and regional interdependence. If we remember to accord local programming its proper role and position, we will be able to master the most complex situations, which are, after all, only combinations of less complex problems.