Transportation Impact Solutions

comments on the preceding 3 papers

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I never quite know how to comment on other people's papers. I can only say that the 3 preceding papers provided a substantial contribution to showing what can be done to bring transportation and other forms of development into harmony.

The paper by Kitamura and Torii is a particularly valuable paper for those concerned with noise because they were able not only to make highway facilities acceptable to the public but also to bring actual value into the cost. They were unsure about the cost being borne entirely by the highway and the highway industry. There is no reason to load onto the public the cost of overcoming noise resulting from private operations such as vehicle and tire noise. The point they clearly make, however, is that, relative to the total cost of the facilities, the costs involved in restricting or reducing the noise level to an acceptable figure would not be regarded as a great addition. If the amount of money required is small, why do we not go ahead and do it? The question is, Who will pay for it? Neither the highway people nor the abutting land owners want to do so.

A second point the authors make relates to the subjectivity of noise and what noise seems to bother people. I recall an investigative reporter with the Boston Globe who measured noise levels in Boston on the heaviest traveled streets and then in the Park Street subway. He found that the noise level in the subway was far greater than that on any street. He also found that in Durgin Park's Restaurant the noise level was the highest of anywhere he had measured, and still people lined up to get in. A great deal of subjectivity surrounds the question of noise, and we need some way of relating actual physical measurements and their meaning to people.

Financing transportation systems by taxes on the employers, as L'Huillier reports French cities may now do, is quite different from what we try to do in the United States. We seem to want to have everyone pay except the employers. Yet, they are the ones who profit by it the most. I doubt that either BART or Washington Metro would have been approved if the cost had to be borne by area employers. It is an interesting approach that should be followed with great interest.

There is one thread through all these papers: Transportation cannot be looked at in isolation, but must be looked at in terms of total development with transportation as one factor. L'Huillier said transportation is subordinated to general development. Of course it must be subordinated, since it is only one factor in development; it is a land use. It not only directs land use but is itself a land use and must be subordinated to the general land use plan.

Sloan covers development possibilities under French law. The bureaucratic system in France is a marvelous thing to behold. It does not seem to matter who is elected; the bureaucracy operates as it has for almost a century, and it operates well.
example, it is doing a fine job in some of the new towns, which illustrate total development. We do not do that in this country. We plan transportation separately. Not only that, we plan the different modes separately. We are not one generation, but two, behind where we ought to be. I do not know why, but possibly it is because we are politically immature compared to others.

We have no way of measuring the quality of transportation as one factor in urban development. We can measure the quality of education: We know we need so many pupils per teacher, for example. We know we need so many square feet per capita for housing. But do we have any means for measuring the quality of transportation? What is good transportation? Good rapid transit or good highway transportation or good air transportation or good total transportation?

An important point emerged from studies in Toronto. When transportation was reasonably free and a choice of mode existed, about 30 percent of the trips in downtown areas during peak hours were in private vehicles. When the planning was done for Ottawa, development was to be limited in the downtown area to a level at which 30 percent of the total demand for transportation could be accommodated on the intended physical highway structure and parking facilities. The figure of 30 percent is low today, but it is interesting that, if there is a good choice of transportation, the figures seem to be lower.

Therefore we cannot look at a single mode. We must look at transportation in total and find some way to measure its quality. Then when we start trading off transportation against other values, we have some means of saying, "If you want to do this, you are hurting transportation by this amount" or "If you want to provide this quality of transportation, then you are hurting some other urban value by that amount."

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If I were asked what existed 10 years ago in the area of research and programs dealing with the impact of transportation facilities on the environment, I would have to say nothing or very little. There was some academic work in this area, but almost no programs to deal with the environmental impact of transportation facilities.

I am amazed that 10 years later we have governments throughout the developed free world, as evidenced by these papers, with programs in force dealing with these problems in sensible and innovative ways. We have come to a time when even the language of noise measurement is international. This language did not exist 10 years ago. People talk knowledgeably about absorptive and reflective barriers. Ten years ago this group would probably not have been aware of what such things were. These papers taken together are evidence of remarkable development in this area.

I am somewhat familiar with the experience of the United Kingdom, where in 1973, a broad and comprehensive piece of legislation was passed called the Land Compensation Act. This act, dealing not only with transportation facilities but with all public projects, essentially revised major parts of the land code in the United Kingdom, provided the means for excess acquisition of land, defined transportation impacts, and made provisions for compensations to individuals for home losses that went beyond the ordinary relocation assistance and property value losses that could be attributed to the operation of transportation facilities.

There are some differences among countries with regard to the remarkable developments that I have alluded to. These developments, although not coordinated efforts, were in response to essentially similar problems: (a) a widespread perception in the 1960s on the part of the community that transportation facilities were inimical to many things related to the quality of life and (b) the appearance of community opposition to highway and other transportation facilities. So, whereas the source of these programs is largely similar in the sense of transportation planners responding to community opposition, some of the speed and, in some cases, the approach taken have been different.
I shall make some conjectural generalizations explaining these differences. It appears clear, for example, from the paper by Kitamura and Torii, the discussion by Sloan and L'Huillier, and my own knowledge of what has happened in the United Kingdom, that these countries have acted faster than the United States and, I believe, Canada. I think this deserves some explanation. Furthermore, it appears that the approach taken in these countries is fundamentally different from what I believe will be the outcome in the United States.

Probably one significant explanatory variable related to these differences is the strength of government to impose land use solutions for the problem of transportation. In the United Kingdom, France, and possibly Japan, the government has much more power to impose land use solutions for transportation problems. The ability to do that rather than to acquire land and carry out extensive alternative solutions makes the problem cheaper to deal with and more feasible from an administrative point of view.

Another explanatory variable may be the decentralization of governmental power. I would say that the speed with which government is developing these programs is, to a large degree, a reflection of the centralization of governmental authority in countries such as the United Kingdom.

In the United States, I do not believe that land use planning and land use solutions are going to play as significant a role as they have in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. When I ask myself what the direction will be in the United States, I find some significant straws in the wind pointing in a different direction. The Interior Committee of the House voted down a piece of land use legislation so watered down as to be almost invisible. This, I think, reflects the real strength of the interests opposed to deeding to the government major ability to control land use. I believe these influences will persist.

I find another straw in the wind in the Federal Register of July 9, 1975, in which the Federal Aviation Administration requests public comment on its Airport Noise Policy. This policy presents 4 alternatives, 3 of which are minor variations on the federal government doing nothing. The other, which I think is a straw man, makes the federal government a total dictator. I have little doubt about how the comments will come in. On the other hand, I think there are grounds for encouragement. Both the airport and highway legislation submitted by this administration contain provisions for highway and airport sponsors to carry out additional activities outside the right-of-way that are designed to deal with environmental and social impacts. I find this encouraging. I would not like to conjecture about what we will find in 5 or 10 years. I have some concern that the effect of inflation and energy may moderate efforts in this direction, and I believe that would be a mistake.