Paratransit Development: Current Conditions
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This Williamsburg Paratransit Conference was organized to attempt to synthesize and evaluate the many significant paratransit services occurring across the United States and Canada. The conference was designed to assess the outcomes, as well as the implications, of the various projects and to consider the messages that they have for other communities. The local, state, and federal officials and the academic and private consultants who constituted the Conference Advisory Committee believed that a careful evaluation was needed of the planning, operating, and performance issues that have arisen during the implementation of a variety of paratransit projects. The committee felt that such analyses would aid in the further development of paratransit systems and services.

The conference was also planned in expectation of the imminent release of a final paratransit policy by the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA). The conference was organized to provide results that should help UMTA to more fully understand the problems and potentials of paratransit and to assist UMTA as it begins the rule-making process pursuant to that policy.

Three and one-half years ago, when the first paratransit conference sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) was held in Williamsburg, Virginia, most existing paratransit services were unique. Many of the services and options that have since come to be recognized as paratransit were not well known by large segments of the transportation provider and planning communities. The appropriate roles of various agencies in DOT were not known and the legitimacy of federal financial assistance to various paratransit modes was far from clear. The paratransit activities and involvement of the Canadian national government and the individual provincial governments were largely unknown.

In a number of ways, the first Williamsburg conference was designed to educate whole segments of the transportation community and to verify several important paratransit concepts.

The environment and atmosphere surrounding this, the second Williamsburg Paratransit Conference, was very different. Ongoing paratransit projects that encompass a number of service approaches are common. Paratransit options are now considered when regional alternatives analyses are performed and are often part of the transportation system management component of regional transportation plans. Just as important, both the Federal Highway Administration and UMTA have funded paratransit projects in significant ways. UMTA has recently funded such projects with regular capital- and operating-assistance-program funds. Carpooling and vanpooling projects are routinely eligible for federal highway-assistance funding. Also noteworthy is the increasing involvement of state and provincial governments; two states currently have extremely large paratransit assistance or demonstration programs.

To the conference organizers, these situations presented several opportunities. First, the incredible acceleration in the quantity and type of paratransit services suggested that there were a number of important and positive learning experiences that should be analyzed and shared among those interested in the development of paratransit. Second, significant amounts of federal money have been channeled into various paratransit projects, which have created opportunities for federal policy to shape paratransit development. Third, the growth in the number of paratransit projects has brought with it not only opportunities but also serious problems for some communities; there was a need to identify those problems and to assess possible solutions. Last, there were a number of new actors, or at least newly recognized actors, in the paratransit—development process; these included federal and state human service agencies, the U.S. Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and others. The involvement of these governmental actors in the process also presented both opportunities and constraints.

The Conference Advisory Committee felt that six major issues cut across and dominate the discussion of these concerns. These issues were

1. Labor protections and labor standards,
2. The appropriate institutional framework for paratransit development,
3. Evaluation and measurement of service effectiveness,
4. Competitive opportunities in paratransit,
5. Coordination of social-service-agency transportation, and
6. Technology requirements.

Thus, the committee commissioned one comprehensive resource paper on each of the first five of these issues and two on the sixth. Each paper was designed to serve two purposes. The first was to describe the state of the art of the issue under discussion and to identify the controversial or topical questions surrounding that issue. To this end, the commissioned papers were presented to all attendees at the two opening plenary sessions of the conference. The papers also had a second function, to generate discussion and debate in
the concurrent individual workshops designed to address separately each of the six major issues. For that reason, the advisory committee accepted papers that suggested controversial ideas or presented unconventional views as long as those ideas and views were clearly labeled as personal opinions or comments and not as empirical observations or facts.

Alschuler’s paper on labor issues presents an examination of the background and evolution of the labor-protection features of Section 13c of the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964. He argues that evolving federal policies toward the public subsidization of different and sometimes competitive modes have created two significant conflicts. The first conflict is a competition between conventional and paratransit providers for a limited market, and the second is the competition between different labor forces. These conflicts are exacerbated by differences between the U.S. Department of Labor and DOT. Although the determination of appropriate recipients for UMTA funding is at the discretion of the Secretary of Transportation, the determination of affected urban mass transportation employees is the obligation of the Secretary of Labor. It is also the Secretary of Labor who determines whether the expenditure of UMTA funds is consistent with the protections afforded by Section 13c. Alschuler argues that the policies developed by the two departments serve as serious constraints to the natural evolution of paratransit. Alschuler is dealing with a significant and controversial issue, and his conclusions are not without some opposition. The paper should be read in that light.

Jones’ paper on the institutional dynamics of paratransit implementation also presents a controversial issue. He notes that federal policy mandates that paratransit, and indeed all transportation, planning efforts take place as part of a regionwide comprehensive, coordinated process. He argues, however, that paratransit flourishes best when generated, planned, and implemented at the community level. Jones asserts that increasing federal involvement in paratransit development could lead to the expenditure of funds on establishing and maintaining costly regional organizational structures and not on the delivery of needed services. The solution, Jones feels, is for the federal government to develop funding regulations that maximize local initiative and involvement.

Kirby and Miller’s paper presents the ways by which communities can assess the effectiveness of various paratransit services. The paper discusses how agencies and providers can and do evaluate the costs and benefits of alternative paratransit proposals. Kirby and Miller note that the formal planning process often fails to adequately evaluate such proposals, largely because communities fail to clearly specify the outcomes and objectives they seek. In addition, communities may use inappropriate or inexact measures or lack comprehensive data. Kirby and Miller suggest ways in which local agencies can improve their evaluation procedures for both paratransit and other transit options and also how local agencies might fill in important gaps in their assessment data.

Rechel’s paper evaluates the objectives that can be achieved by encouraging competition among paratransit providers in a community. His paper addresses competition for contractual services rather than free market entry and competition for all services. He contends that the two most important barriers to paratransit competition are the Section 13c labor-protection features of UMTA funding assistance and the regulatory policies of state and local governments. Rechel discusses three measures that would increase competition among service providers in a community and presents some examples of the use of such measures in the delivery of paratransit services in several communities.

Cutler’s paper on coordination of social-service-agency transportation providers focuses on five demonstration coordination projects being funded by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Cutler urges a realistic assessment of the benefits of coordinating services and providers; she notes that actual coordinating efforts take significant managerial time and organizational skill. To be effective, such coordination efforts require an accurate picture of the needs and ridership patterns of all clients involved, an understanding of the current costs of all agencies involved, and a realistic evaluation of available resources. Cutler finds that these assessments are usually beyond most human- and social-service-agency providers. She notes that there is as yet no proof of decreased costs or increased service quality from coordination efforts. Cutler concludes that coordination attempts hold promise only if all of those involved make realistic assessments of not only the possible benefits but also the real costs incurred in effecting coordination.

Two papers address the technology requirements for paratransit development. Hendrickson’s paper attempts to identify the appropriate conditions for the use of computer, computer-assisted, and manual dispatching of paratransit vehicles. He notes that there are only limited comparative data available but those data suggest that automated dispatching is more expensive than manual dispatching at the present scale of shared-ride, flexibly routed paratransit services. However, Hendrickson also notes that other factors must be considered in a decision on the adoption of computer dispatching. Among these are the decreasing costs associated with computer hardware and the growing need for accurate cost and ridership information.

Samuels’ paper presents the second discussion of technology; it addresses the development of a prototype of a fully accessible paratransit vehicle. Samuels identifies the various statutory and regulatory mandates that affect the development of such a vehicle and notes the conflicts such requirements create. He argues that it is counterproductive to pursue the elusive goal of developing a single fully accessible vehicle that can provide all services to all riders and urges that consideration be given to modifying existing vehicles in a way that increases their effective accessibility and utilization.

The next section of this report describes some observations made at the conference and some general recommendations of the participants. This is followed by the seven resource papers and the reports of the six workshops and then by the edited transcript of the closing plenary session.