Transportation Planning in Small and Medium-Sized Communities: Greater Flexibility, Improved Communication, and Simplified Requirements

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The urban transportation planning process formalized in the early 1960s has become increasingly diversified in the 1970s. Recently, special attention has been focused on the planning needs, requirements, and processes for small and medium-sized communities. Because of the need to develop processes and techniques that will provide adequate guidance to transportation decision makers, the Federal Highway Administration has sponsored the development of a series of manuals that address state and local concerns while being mutually supportive. The emphasis of transportation planning for small and medium-sized urban areas is focused on three precepts: (a) greater flexibility in organizational and administrative arrangements; (b) improved communication between the decision maker, the planner, and the general public; and (c) simplification of the administrative planning requirements as well as of the procedures. The role at the federal level will be to improve the planning of transportation systems by facilitating activities that respond to local goals and concerns.

During the last 10 or 12 years, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has become increasingly aware of the need to provide adequate guidance on the needs of small and medium-sized communities to transportation decision makers. To do this, it has been necessary to develop processes and techniques that match the complexity of the transportation problems. Thus, a series of manuals (1) to guide transportation planning in small urban areas has been developed. These manuals address the technical as well as the management aspects of transportation planning programs; essentially, they represent a revision of the widely used National Committee on Urban Transportation manuals developed in 1958.

It was the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962 that first mandated the continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive planning process in all urbanized areas that have populations of 50,000 or more. This act led to the establishment of urban transportation planning processes in all such urbanized areas and, many states, realizing the benefits of transportation planning, also established a comprehensive, integrated approach in urban areas having populations of fewer than 50,000.

The planning process that emerged in the early 1960s was a relatively uniform one directed primarily at analyzing and evaluating transportation needs and developing major-capital long-term investments as the solutions. Urban transportation planning in the late 1970s is an increasingly diverse activity when compared with the uniform process of the 1960s. The highway and transit legislation recently enacted reflects the growing diversity of interests in the planning process by including such factors as energy conservation; system performance; and social, economic, and environmental objectives as goals that must be addressed in the planning process.

Most small urban areas are now served by mature transportation systems and, along with increased diversity in the planning process, local and state officials are faced with insufficient capital resources and, consequently, must refocus their planning emphasis on efficient management of existing facilities. This means that they must deal with current or short-term considerations, including less-costly alternatives that make more efficient use of the existing system, rather than with the more uncertain long-term transportation options.

To change the emphasis of the transportation planning process to include adequate consideration of energy, environmental, and social concerns and also function within budgetary limitations will require attention to three major areas (although these considerations are directed here to planning in small and medium-sized communities, many of them are also applicable to the urban planning process in larger urban areas). The three areas are:

1. Greater flexibility in the planning process;
2. Improved communication between the decision maker, the planner, and the general public; and
3. Simplification of planning requirements.

FLEXIBILITY IN PLANNING PROCESS

Flexibility in the planning process is needed so that it will be more responsive to the needs of small and medium-sized areas. Clearly, the planning process established for larger metropolitan areas to address their complex transportation issues is not appropriate in scope and scale for use in small and medium-sized
areas. Because of this difference in scale, the FHWA-Urban Mass Transportation Administration joint planning regulations issued in September 1975 include a discussion of planning activities that should be conducted to the degree appropriate for the size of the area and the complexity of its transportation problems. This flexibility in planning activities is further reinforced in the new highway and transit legislation through the provision that the process "shall be continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive to the degree appropriate based on the complexity of the transportation problems."

The diversity of issues facing urban areas today, as well as the variations in population and economic growth, make a flexible planning process essential. The approach to planning in an area of slow or moderate growth (such as Lancaster, Pennsylvania), where the primary concern is to maintain and improve the efficiency of the existing transportation network, should be different from that of an area experiencing rapid growth (such as Sarasota, Florida), where the need is to provide new capacity. Planning must be oriented to specific issues rather than to broad generalities, and this can only be achieved through a flexible planning process—a planning process that is responsive to changing conditions, policies, and local attitudes or unforeseen circumstances.

Flexibility is also necessary in the organizational and administrative arrangements. Thus, the new legislation allows local officials, in cooperation with the governor of the state, to redesignate a metropolitan planning organization as the forum through which they participate in the planning process and provides a mechanism for changes where existing organizations are not adequately meeting local needs.

Although the planning regulations and the new legislation provide for appropriate flexibility in the planning process, the responsibility for ensuring that the process established in any community is flexible and responsive to the local issues rests with the local planner. This leads to the second area, that of improved communication between the planner, the decision maker, and the general public.

**IMPROVED COMMUNICATION**

If the planning process is to provide meaningful and timely input to the decision maker, better communication is needed between the planner and the decision maker. The planner must be aware of the transportation issues and problems facing the area. An isolated approach to planning only results in projects surrounded by controversy and in plans that have no reasonable chance of implementation.

The decision maker, on the other hand, should fully understand the benefits to be gained from and the effects of transportation options on other functional planning programs and on the comprehensive metropolitan planning goals and development policies. Decisions will be made among transportation options based on the information available. The goal of the urban transportation planner should be to ensure that decision makers have the results and benefits of the planning process before them. Although this is a very difficult goal to realize, it must be pursued if the planning process is to be relevant to the issues confronting decision makers.

Improved communication is also needed between the planner and the general public. Planning in small urban areas should be sensitive to the needs of the local people, and this sensitivity can only be achieved through direct contact with them. The general public is an excellent resource for identifying transportation problems and issues and its advice should be sought. Many of the controversies surrounding transportation projects could be avoided by involving the public early in the planning process.

The need for improved communication among planners, decision makers, and the public can be illustrated in the area of environmental considerations. The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 necessitate a strong interaction among these groups to ensure that the transportation aspects of the clean air plans are compatible with the general goals and objectives for the area. U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)-Environmental Protection Agency Transportation Planning Guidelines, developed in response to the 1977 amendments, identify ways in which this communication process can be improved and, in many cases, simplified.

**SIMPLIFICATION OF PLANNING REQUIREMENTS**

The third and final area is the simplification of planning requirements. A major objective of President Carter's National Urban Policy, issued on March 27, 1978, is to encourage and support efforts to improve local planning and management capacity and the effectiveness of existing federal programs by coordinating the programs, simplifying the planning requirements, reorienting resources, and reducing paperwork.

Considerable amounts of time are devoted to the administrative requirements of the planning process. Although the time spent in developing the annual unified planning work program and prospectus is worthwhile, ways in which the workload could be reduced are desirable. For example, minimizing the certification requirements by allowing a biennial certification period for areas having populations of fewer than 200,000 might be helpful.

In addition to scaling down the administrative requirements, the use of simplified planning procedures should be encouraged. The question of what technical analysis is essential for an area to be certified has caused considerable discussion and some confusion. There is no simple answer to this question. Clearly, in areas where population and economic studies and projections show little or no growth, an analysis of the traffic operations to improve capacity and safety type based primarily on existing conditions should meet the need for the highway-oriented transportation planning process. In most areas, some forecast of demand will be needed. However, where forecasts already exist, a great deal of judgment must be exercised in weighing the need for a revision versus that for a better analysis of existing conditions.

In Georgia, the state department of transportation has made a conscious effort to streamline the planning process for smaller urban areas. There, the local governments are the ones to initiate the planning process through a formal request, and they supply the forecast of the socioeconomic data. Once the forecasts are made, the development of the plan, including travel forecasting procedures, alternative-plan development and evaluation, and plan selection normally requires about three months by one department of transportation employee working full time and another available for help and consultation as needed.

A significant aspect of the Georgia effort is that it is an attempt to involve the local officials as partners with the state in developing the transportation plans. This effort also reflects an attempt to meet the goals of the national urban policy by encouraging local participation.

The DOT programs and procedures are being reviewed to see how they might better serve to implement the objectives of the urban policy. The recently enacted highway and transit legislation implements several of
the urban policy objectives. For example, local officials are specifically identified as partners with the states in the development of federally aided plans and programs. Because DOT programs constitute a significant part of the approximately $30 billion in federal-aid urban programs, transportation is a key element in the urban policy. The interface between air quality and transportation discussed above adds a new dimension to the planning requirements in small urban areas. Although the emphasis at the national level is to address the transportation-related pollution problems of large urban areas, small urban areas will also have to be concerned with air quality because the clean air act does not distinguish between large and small areas. As a general guideline, the level of effort for air-quality-related transportation planning in small urban areas should be commensurate with the magnitude and geographical extent of the air-quality problems in the area.

SUMMARY

The key points for better transportation planning are greater flexibility, improved communication, and simplified requirements. Although those at the federal level can contribute to simplifying the planning requirements, it is up to local planners to ensure that the planning process is suited to meeting the needs of the area as seen by the local elected officials and that the resulting projects are within the financial capabilities of the funding agencies. The need to establish a relevant, issue-oriented planning process will be particularly important in the approximately 40 areas that will become urbanized as a result of the 1980 census.

REFERENCE


What Should We Be Trying to Do in the Transportation Planning Process?

Dan C. Dees, Office of Policy and Planning, Illinois Department of Transportation

This paper presents many of the issues and concerns surrounding the transportation planning process and products from a state perspective. The uniqueness of each urban area, including the small and medium-sized ones, dictates a process that is responsive to local needs and products that address the important issues. The regulations formulated at various governmental levels must work to the advantage of the local area; therefore, latitude must be an integral component implicit in this regulation. The long-range planning process cannot be ignored, but its de-emphasis may be required to effectively facilitate short-range programs. A survey of local public officials in Illinois has reaffirmed the need to simplify the administrative requirements of the planning process and increase its flexibility by allowing local transportation decision makers to define its direction. The enthusiasm for data and an ongoing data base is not valid since the appropriate data are not collected and the resulting data are not analyzed. The vitality of the transportation planning process rests with the effective union of local decision makers and transportation planners. Local determination and a responsible program that reflects local goals and priorities is the mandate of the transportation planning process.

The time is right to chart a new course for the urban transportation planning process. The problems and issues should be analyzed and a new direction and a new focus developed.

What are we really buying with the millions of dollars spent each year on transportation planning? How are we spending those dollars? In Illinois, the dollars spent on planning are counted and the construction projects that an equivalent amount of money would buy are determined. In the small urban areas of Illinois, the planning funds exceed 10 percent of the dollar amount of federally constructed projects each year. The nearly $30 million of federal money spent nationwide on highway planning alone last year would have resurfaced 320 km (200 miles) of city streets. Over the past five years, 1600 km (1000 miles) could have been resurfaced. We should be sure we are spending each planning dollar wisely.

SMALL URBAN AREAS ARE DIFFERENT

Many planners are associated with the small urban area process and familiar with the transportation and socioeconomic characteristics of such areas. Others, however, are involved in planning at a statewide or a nationwide level and tend to think of small areas (such as Sarasota, Florida) in the same light as Miami, St. Louis, Chicago, or Boston. There is, however, a vast difference in the scope and complexity of work and the planning effort required between large and small cities.

Let us stop for a moment and profile a typical small area. There are subtle differences among areas, but there are also fundamental similarities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>100,000 to 150,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population growth (%)</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public transportation ridership (percentage of daily person trips)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority population (percentage of total)</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handicapped population (who would require special equipment) (percentage of total)</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
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In these areas, air pollution is not usually recognized as being a problem. The regional planning commission staff is often limited to one transportation planner who has one to two years' experience, and the central city