Transportation System Management: Observations and Comments on Future Directions

C. Kenneth Orski, German Marshall Fund, Washington, D.C.

Almost exactly three years have elapsed since many of us here today met in Minneapolis to discuss the transportation system management (TSM) policy, then barely one year old. Now a little grayer and a little wiser, we have convened again to consider what has been accomplished since then and to compare the insights we have acquired in implementing TSM policy.

I have been away from the TSM scene for a while, and it would be presumptuous of me in these opening remarks to attempt to summarize the state of TSM today. I will leave this to Meyer and Deen who will follow me this morning, to the authors of the resource papers, and to all of you who have been in the front lines of TSM implementation for the past three years. Nor do I feel compelled to launch into the standard sermon I used to deliver as a federal official about the importance of TSM; I will leave that to my successors. Instead, secure in the knowledge that I can now offer advice without fear of having to act upon it, I propose to share with you some thoughts about TSM—thoughts in part stimulated by the papers prepared for this conference and in part based on reflections of the past year and a half, since my departure from the federal government.

What has struck me most in reading the resource papers, in reviewing recent planning literature, and in conversations with local officials around the country is how thoroughly the TSM concept has succeeded in becoming institutionalized in the transportation planning process. For a concept that strives to fundamentally restructure the planning process, this is no mean accomplishment. I do not mean to imply that the TSM policy has ceased to be controversial in all quarters or that the federal TSM requirement has been unquestioningly embraced by local agencies everywhere. But I do not think anyone would disagree that the concept of transportation system management has entered the mainstream of transportation thinking. The rationale for TSM is by now well understood and accepted—as are most of its techniques. What is more, numerous actions are being planned and executed in the name of TSM, and the term itself is becoming a permanent part of the vocabulary of the transportation planning and engineering professions. Indeed, the TSM acronym has crossed the Atlantic and is being used abroad—a supreme accolade to its universal acceptance.

What accounts for the rapid diffusion, acceptance, and appeal of the TSM concept? It is not enough to say that there was no choice but to embrace it once it became the object of a federal regulation. The Federal Register is replete with rules and regulations that have been given only token compliance. The explanation, I think, lies deeper. At the risk of sounding ponderous, I believe that the TSM concept has been embraced because it was an idea whose time had come. I mean by this that TSM had come to reflect a set of values and concerns that independently have gained wide currency in the United States. These values include the emerging conservation ethic, the growing fiscal conservatism, a new emphasis on reusing the old rather than throwing it away, and a newfound awareness that the age of cheap, unlimited energy is over. TSM happened to be at once an expression of these new values and an instrument for their realization. It was, in other words, a policy fundamentally in tune with the mood of the times—a concept that, I daresay, would have to be invented today if it did not already exist.

And so, while we may—indeed should—continue to refine the TSM concept and seek its politically acceptable forms, we should do so secure in the knowledge that its foundations rest on firm ground. Thus, I suggest that we can spend our time here more productively if we concentrate on the question of how to make TSM work rather than on debating whether it is needed.

As we get down to the business of discussing the practical aspects of TSM implementation, I would leave you with these thoughts and a few unanswered questions.

First of all, how important is it that TSM be conducted as a system planning activity at the regional level? Frankly—and here I join the thoughts expressed in Jones' paper—I have always entertained serious doubts about the need for a comprehensive, top-to-bottom approach to TSM. Somehow the type of actions that TSM evokes in my mind—small-scale, low-cost, quick-turnaround, incremental actions whose effects and beneficiaries are often confined to the scale of a community or even a neighborhood—seem to be more suitable to local initiative and implementation than to an areawide approach. Planning institutions at the regional level may be too far removed—temperamentally as well as geographically—to be capable of building an effective political consensus and coalition for TSM improvements. Planning a residential parking permit program or organizing a neighborhood transit service, and garnering political support for it, are not the type of activities at which the staffs of regional planning agencies necessarily excel.

I do not wish to denigrate the importance of systemwide planning or the role of the metropolitan planning organization. Long-range stategic planning is important in providing localities with a blueprint for the future. But we need to reexamine our blind allegiance to the concept of systemic planning and consider whether we might not be better off with a different institutional division of labor, i.e., greater decentralization of planning

and implementation functions and a greater sharing of power among regional, municipal, and even submunicipal (neighborhood) institutions.

The second thought I would leave with you is the need to take greater account of the role of the private sector in TSM implementation. Many TSM initiatives—flexible work hours, vanpooling, off-street parking management, and pedestrian malls, for example—are significantly dependent on the initiative, support, and good will of private enterprise. It makes good sense, therefore, to welcome the private sector as a partner in the TSM coalition. From what I see happening around the country, the role of the private sector in delivery of public transportation services is going to grow. As the cost of gasoline continues to climb, more and more private employers, shopping center operators, developers of new communities, and resort owners will turn to public transportation to ensure continued access to their facilities and to protect their investments. In time, many large employment centers, regional shopping malls, amusement parks, and such may find it necessary to institute their own neighborhood transit systems in order to retain their increasingly fuel-conservation-conscious clientele.

Some early manifestations of this trend are already visible in California, where several regional shopping centers set up their own private transit services during the recent fuel shortage. There is also a growing trend nationally among suburban employers to provide company-sponsored-and-financed bus and vanpool services for their employees—a fringe benefit that is already quite common in Europe. All this increased activity argues in my view for a closer integration of private efforts in TSM planning and implementation—an idea that is reflected in the paper by Volk, who sees the private sector as a potentially valuable constituency for TSM.

Third, I would draw your attention to the less visible although highly beneficial TSM-type actions that can be introduced—and are being introduced in growing numbers—at the local level. These include residential parking permit programs, traffic diversion, commuter parking bans, street closures, and other small-scale attempts to manage automobile use at the community or neighborhood level. These actions may be less glamorous and less eye-catching than corridor-level improvements such as diamond lanes, but they are no less important as tools for environmental betterment and fuel conservation.

Finally, I would add to the list of neglected TSM options discussed in the paper by Morin the practice of track sharing. By and large, those concerned with rail planning have failed to embrace the philosophy of transportation system management—the need to fully exploit the facilities already in place before embarking on costly programs of new construction. Many of our metropolitan areas possess well-developed rail networks that are grossly underused. In my judgment, more attention should be given to placing these facilities—often used only occasionally for freight or Amtrak trains—at the service of commuters through various kinds of track-sharing arrangements. Joint use of rail facilities by freight and commuter services is a potentially high-payoff TSM option that has not been given adequate attention in the past. Now, with the city of San Diego in the lead role, track sharing is receiving increased scrutiny and will be the subject of special hearings by the House Subcommittee on Cities under Congressman Henry Reuss in the near future.

Let me conclude by saying how much I appreciate your invitation to join you here today. It is good to be back among old friends, and I look forward to sharing with you two days of stimulating and productive discussions.