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Improving the Effectiveness of a Citizens' Regional Transportation Committee

Peter M. Lima

The roles performed by the citizens' regional transportation committee that operates in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area, a major midwestern region located in the states of Nebraska and Iowa, are discussed. This committee participates in four primary roles: (a) advisory, (b) advocacy, (c) review and comment, and (d) participatory planning. Specific examples of each role are presented, and each role is then analyzed for its effectiveness in resolving transportation issues. In general, the review-and-comment and advocacy roles have been the most effective among the four roles because they encourage participation and are oriented toward project issues. Recommendations are made on how to improve the effectiveness of these two roles. The recommendations are directed primarily toward the project-implementation stage rather than the earlier stages of the planning process. Recommendations are also made to further improve the effectiveness of a regional citizens' committee by breaking down the transportation system into corridors or subareas. This step would help to encourage citizen participation earlier in the process by focusing on local as well as regional issues.

The purpose of this paper is to present observations and perceptions of a citizens' regional transportation committee and to suggest improvements to the advisory process followed by this type of committee. Since I am chairman of the committee in question, the viewpoint expressed here is that of the private citizen rather than the professional planner. The committee discussed here is one working committee among several in a formal citizens' advisory board of the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA). The advisory board, which is the central focus of the planning agency's ongoing citizen-participation program, provides guidance to the agency with regard to comprehensive planning and systems-level transportation planning. One comprehensive analysis of citizen-participation techniques has documented various types of advisory committees and task forces (1). But the operation of an ongoing regional committee cannot be easily categorized; it is complex and involves functions that are not restricted to giving advice on the long-range planning process. Rather, the committee members may participate in A-95 review or may become advocate planners for a certain project. These different roles then contribute in varying degrees to the effectiveness of the participation program in resolving transportation issues.

It is the intent of this paper to discuss how these roles can be used to the best advantage to improve the overall effectiveness of such an ongoing committee. In this regard, the following sections of this paper present descriptions of the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan

area, the regional transportation planning process, and the citizens' transportation committee. The paper then presents observations and perceptions of this transportation committee and offers suggestions for improving the effectiveness of regional committees.

DESCRIPTION OF METROPOLITAN REGION

The Omaha-Council Bluffs standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA) (see Figures 1 and 2) is composed of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, Nebraska, and Pottawattamie County, Iowa, and includes more than 20 incorporated cities, towns, and villages. Among these municipalities, the three most important are the cities of Omaha and Bellevue in Nebraska and Council Bluffs in Iowa. The Missouri River, a primary inland waterway, divides the region into the Nebraska and Iowa portions, and the Platte River borders the southwestern portion of the region. Within the SMSA, the physical terrain is a gently rolling landscape with only a few natural barriers to urban development, the most prominent of which are the floodplains of the Missouri and Platte Rivers and the wind-deposited loess hills on the east bank of the Missouri River.

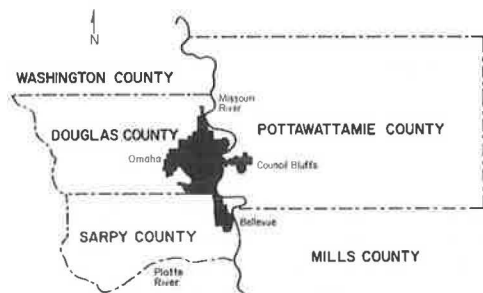
As a result of limited physical restrictions on growth and intense agricultural activity, the Omaha-Council Bluffs SMSA grew in population from 100 000 inhabitants in 1870 to more than 600 000 by 1976. Historically, urban growth concentrated in the city of Omaha, which currently accounts for more than 60 percent of the total SMSA population. More recently, the pattern of growth has shifted to the southwestern portion of the region and is primarily concentrated in the city of Bellevue and in Sarpy County. Although the Omaha-Council Bluffs area has undergone significant urban development, the amount of developed land accounts for only 10 percent of the total land area. Hence, the SMSA remains oriented toward agriculture, which continues to be the economic mainstay of the region. Since 1950, however, agriculturally oriented employment has declined, and employment in the trades and services has grown.

Although the central business districts (CBDs) of Omaha and Council Bluffs constitute the traditional urban core, the metropolitan region has undergone intensive decentralization over the past decade. In general, urban development has sprawled outward,

Figure 1. Location map of Omaha-Council Bluffs SMSA.



Figure 2. Omaha-Council Bluffs SMSA.



and this has resulted in a low-density pattern serviced by lineal commercial development. This fairly rapid suburbanization of the region resulted in the following transportation inefficiencies: (a) uneven distribution of highway capacity throughout the region, (b) low rates of automobile occupancy, (c) severe limits on alternate modes to the automobile, and (d) noise pollution, air pollution, and energy waste as by-products of sprawling development (2).

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING

The regional planning agency, MAPA, was formed in 1967 under an interlocal cooperation agreement for the purpose of coordinating local planning and development activities (the planning region includes the SMSA plus Washington County, Nebraska, and Mills County, Iowa). The agency is governed by a 44-member council of officials that meets quarterly to set policies, goals, and objectives for the agency. A nine-member board of directors then implements this policy and directs the planning staff. MAPA is the designated planning agency in a variety of program areas, including (a) A-95 review, (b) land use and housing planning, (c) air quality planning, (d) water-quality-management planning, and (e) long- and short-range transportation planning.

Within the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area, the Continuing Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Transportation Study (COATS) is the designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) to carry out the urban transportation planning process. This multi-agency organization is structured along the traditional comprehensive, continuing, and cooperative (3C) organizational pattern, which consists of a policy committee, a technical committee, a technical staff, and a citizens' advisory committee (see Figure 3). Since COATS is an integral part of MAPA, the MAPA board of directors acts as the policy committee for the transportation study (the COATS transportation study

includes the urbanized portion of the SMSA). Furthermore, MAPA provides the lead technical staff for the regional transportation planning process as well as the overall comprehensive planning process, and additional technical assistance is provided by the Nebraska Department of Roads and the Iowa Department of Transportation. The members of the technical advisory committee function as advisors to the board of directors and the technical staff, and they also act as coordinators between the staff and the local implementing agencies. In addition to the advice given by the technical committee, the citizens' transportation committee performs an advisory function for the MAPA staff.

The COATS process involves a variety of tasks:

1. Coordination of transportation activities throughout the metropolitan region,
2. Development of a long-range regional transportation plan,
3. Development of a short-range transportation plan in the form of a transportation system management (TSM) element, and
4. Preparation of a transportation improvement program (TIP) that consists of an annual element and a subsequent five-year element.

The COATS 1995 Interim Transportation Plan, adopted in 1974 and subsequently amended, is currently the official long-range plan that guides local and state decision makers in the allocation of available resources. Based on the 1995 plan, both highway and transit projects are selected, prioritized, and placed on the TIP. In addition to projects selected from the long-range plan, the TIP includes projects listed in the TSM element of the transportation plan. Once a project is placed on the TIP, the agency or agencies responsible for that project generally initiate work leading toward the implementation of the project.

THE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

As previously mentioned, the transportation committee is a working committee of the larger and more comprehensive citizens' advisory board, which was formed to involve private citizens from all socioeconomic segments in the planning for the five-county region. Membership on the advisory board may include representatives of the business community, labor organizations, minority organizations, chambers of commerce, and special-purpose organizations as well as private citizens. Each member is nominated by the advisory board's executive committee and subsequently appointed by the board of directors. The advisory board can make recommendations to the staff, the technical committees, and the board of directors. Five working committees form the nucleus of the board's activity: committees on (a) community involvement, (b) human resources, (c) regional growth and development, (d) natural resources, and (e) transportation. Although the advisory committee formulates broad policy, each committee follows its own work plan. Moreover, each committee can issue its own statements and recommendations without the vote of the whole advisory board as long as the statements are issued in the name of the committee. Thus, all substantive participation is accomplished within one of the five working committees.

Currently, the transportation committee is composed of a chairman, a vice-chairman, and approximately 15 members whose interests include transportation for the elderly and the handicapped, environmental conservation, pedestrian and bicycle

Figure 3. Structure of Omaha-Council Bluffs transportation planning organization.

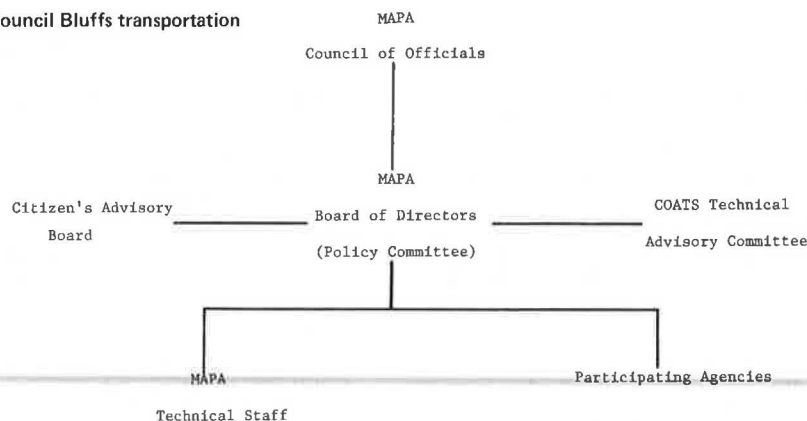
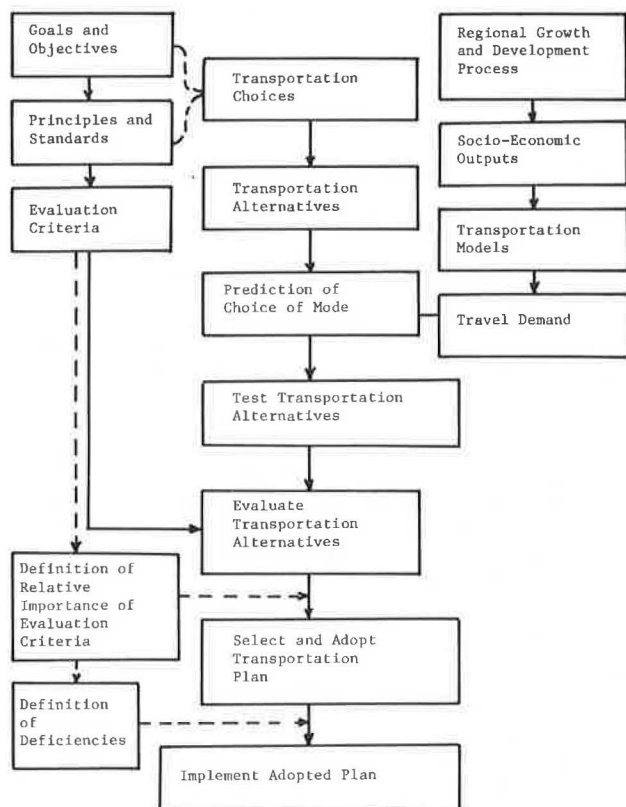


Figure 4. COATS year-2000 planning process.



transportation, and efficient highway and transit transportation in general. The chairman of the committee is also a member of the advisory board's executive committee and a nonvoting member of the transportation technical advisory committee. His or her membership on the technical advisory committee, even with only nonvoting status, definitely strengthens the link between the technologists and private citizens.

Each monthly committee meeting is based on a predetermined agenda jointly prepared by the committee chairman and the director of the planning agency's transportation department. The agenda usually focuses on an important transportation issue or planning activity and generally includes routine items such as A-95 review cases. This brings up an interesting point—the fact that the committee does not have a formal charge. However, the charge can be broadly interpreted, as follows: to provide continuous guidance,

which is sensitive to the needs and wants of the regional populace, to the planning staff in the preparation of long- and short-range regional transportation plans. With respect to the specific activities that have been carried out by the committee over the past two years, each activity can be categorized by a particular committee role: (a) advisory, (b) advocacy, (c) review and comment, and (d) participatory planning. The following discussion elaborates on these roles and presents example roles played by the transportation committee.

Advisory Role

As noted above, the advisory role is the broad function of the transportation committee. But, more specifically, the advisory role of the committee is to provide advice to the transportation staff on the perceptions, needs, and desires of the people in the region with regard to regional transportation issues. For example, the identification of transportation goals, objectives, and evaluation criteria for the Omaha-Council Bluffs area would be part of the advisory role; in fact, the committee made significant contributions to the development of the evaluation criteria for the year-2000 plan [Figure 4 (3, p. 2) shows the year-2000 planning process]. Generally, advisory functions are primarily concerned with policy issues rather than project issues, which would be handled in the advocacy or the review-and-comment role.

Advocacy Role

The distinction between the advisory and advocacy roles is that in the advocacy role a citizen takes a definite position on a given project or policy statement. For example, the committee has supported the need to expand pedestrian opportunities in general, but it has also advocated the construction of a specific recreational trail in Douglas County and presented testimony at a public hearing on behalf of the trail. Although the committee's support of the trail contributed to the decision of the county board of commissioners to fund preliminary studies, the project was ultimately defeated because of complaints from the owners of adjacent property. On the policy side, the committee presented testimony with regard to maintaining strong photochemical standards for the states of Nebraska and Iowa. The committee was not successful in this case but did have an opportunity to present its viewpoint on air quality planning.

Review-and-Comment Role

In the review-and-comment role, each citizen reviews specific proposals and plans and then reacts to them in the form of verbal or written comments. The committee regularly reviews the regional A-95 cases and makes comments on these cases to the staff, which in turn forwards the comments to the technical advisory committee and to the board of directors. In cases in which the committee formulates strong comments against a particular case, the chairman or another committee member will present the committee's comments to the technical advisory committee. It is interesting to note that the review of a proposed plan often evolves into an advocacy position by the committee. As a case in point, the review of the proposed recreational trail eventually developed into active support for the trail.

Of course, the committee sometimes takes an adversary position after reviewing a particular project. For example, the committee reviewed a proposal by the Nebraska Department of Roads to construct a new roadway through a fish hatchery and nature area in order to improve vehicle safety. In light of what the committee interpreted as weak evidence in support of the project, members took a strong, almost an advocacy, position against the project and recommended alternatives. As a result of the comments of the committee and others, the Nebraska Department of Roads is reconsidering its original proposal and rewriting the environmental impact statement.

Participatory Planning

As referred to here, participatory planning means the active involvement of the committee members in developing original plans or even policy statements. In an attempt to generate enthusiasm among citizens, the transportation committee initiated its own study of pedestrian facilities in the Omaha-Council Bluffs region. The primary purpose was to develop guidelines for pedestrian and bicycle transportation to be used in long-range planning. The results of this planning initiative have been disappointing because the committee members have been subject to time constraints and have not been able to contribute to the study as originally intended. However, the work that has been accomplished has at least generated interest in pedestrian and bicycle transportation among citizens and professionals in the region.

In general, the members on the transportation committee conduct initiative planning through their advocacy and participatory-planning roles and carry out reactive planning through their advisory and review-and-comment roles. The next aspect to be examined is the effectiveness of each one of these roles in responding to and resolving transportation issues.

OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

The goal of any citizen-participation program is the timely and orderly resolution of transportation issues among all parties concerned. A regional advisory committee such as the one outlined above achieves this goal to varying degrees depending on the specific role the committee plays.

Before each role is examined in more detail, two general points must be made. The first is that, because of the committee's small size, representation of the metropolitan population as a whole is limited. This limitation does not occur by design but reflects the difficulty in attracting participants to systems-level

planning. The second point is that restricted representation is further complicated by the type of person who participates on the committee. Such a person is often the "professional" citizen who is very interested in and informed about regional issues and participates on a regular basis. This is not to say that such a member's contribution is not valuable; rather, it is to say that it is probably not representative of the larger population. At first glance, then, the overall effectiveness of the committee appears to be questionable, but further analysis indicates that the committee does in fact play a definite role in both clarifying and resolving issues.

In its pure form, the ongoing advisory role is a difficult one to carry out because it involves a slow, meticulous, and often painful process. Furthermore, the exact contribution of this role to the resolution of issues is not easily assessed. For example, although a committee may work diligently on formulating regional goals and objectives, the overall contribution of this effort to the planning process cannot be evaluated for several years. In fact, the effort probably will not be evaluated and, as a result, the individual participants may lose interest in this role. Although the overall effectiveness of this role in resolving issues is difficult to assess, the ongoing advisory role has two important impacts on the planning process:

1. Through the ongoing advisory role, a regional committee maintains the continuity of citizen participation throughout the process, thereby ensuring that the staff and politicians remain responsive to citizen input at all times.
2. The members of the committee can broaden the staff's knowledge of the region and can guide it with respect to citizen perceptions and needs.

The advocacy role is issue based. It is a positive role that forces individuals to analyze facts, take a position on an issue, and then formulate alternate recommendations. Since people gravitate easily toward the advocacy function, it encourages participation. In fact, it appears to be the most interesting of the four roles for most participants. But it is a dangerous role for a small group to play—i.e., for a limited number of individuals to perform as advocates for projects that may affect many people at a more localized scale. What is needed is the involvement of more people at the local level, in the early stages of the planning process. It is difficult to involve more individuals at an early stage because the implementation of the project is usually remote. But, since the advocacy role definitely brings out the issues and helps to resolve them among citizens, professionals, and political decision makers, it should be emphasized and broadened by a regional committee.

In the review-and-comment role, a citizen is presented a plan by the staff and is then asked to express his or her opinion of the plan. In general, committee members are comfortable in this reactive role and actively participate on a regular basis. Of course, a committee can review many different types of plans, but this role is highly effective in resolving issues with regard to relatively small-scale projects.

Along this line, the A-95 review process is an effective mechanism for citizen review of projects that are at the implementation stage. Citizen review of A-95 cases helps to broaden the objectivity of the technical committee, which also reviews these cases. Technical committees sometimes gloss over a particular case, either for expediency or because one committee member may have a vested interest in the project. In addition, the committee may fail to per-

ceive the importance of some project issue. For example, the technical committee may neglect pedestrian facilities in a subdivision case, whereas this might be highly important to the citizens' committee. Here, the citizens' committee can be very effective in identifying project issues and noting weaknesses in a given plan.

As used here, the term participatory planning refers to initiative planning by citizens that includes data collection, analysis, and plan preparation. This is a highly energy-consuming role for a committee to take on and, unless the committee members are extremely interested in a particular project, the effort will be fruitless. The best way to handle participatory planning is to narrow the scope of the project. Along this line, the committee can prepare observations, perceptions, and/or policy statements on a particular project. In some cases, the committee can present its own additions to the regional transportation plan prepared by the staff. This would be in the form of a supplemental report issued by the committee.

Although I was not involved, the transportation committee was highly successful in integrating their own project proposals into the Omaha-Council Bluffs 1995 transportation plan. This was very effective participatory planning, but again the role was enacted largely at the end rather than at the earlier stages of the process. Involvement at the end of the process may be unavoidable because the participants need to have a substantial amount of technical groundwork laid before they can actually initiate planning on their own.

The citizens' transportation committee in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area has participated in a variety of roles, ranging from the pure advisory role to the participatory planning role. In general, the committee roles that are based on the transportation issues and deal with specific projects at the implementation stage have been helpful in resolving transportation problems. In this regard, the review-and-comment role, particularly as applied to A-95 cases, is effective. The advocacy role has also been successful in the clarification and resolution of issues. Although the participatory-planning role is oriented toward a given project, it has only been moderately effective because it involves a large commitment by the committee. Ironically, since this committee is an advisory committee, the pure advisory role appears to be the least effective of the four roles. This weakness results from the fact that the advisory role is often concerned with abstract ideas rather than concrete facts. Moreover, the exact impact of this role on the planning process is difficult to assess. But the potential information to be gained from this role, as from all the roles, is important.

IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS OF A CITIZENS' REGIONAL COMMITTEE

This paper has repeatedly mentioned that the effectiveness of a citizens' regional committee should be improved, but it is difficult to place a quantitative measure of effectiveness on any type of participation program. With respect to the effectiveness of a participation program, one report (4, p. 17) notes the following:

The important concepts are whether or not all affected persons were allowed an equal opportunity to participate, understood the planning process, and understood the issues of choice, and whether or not the contributions and preferences of these interests were given due consideration by the agency in making its decision.

Based on the above concepts and the observations set forth in this paper, the effectiveness of a regional transportation committee can be improved by (a) broadening committee representation, (b) basing participation on the issues and specific projects, and (c) pressuring the decision makers to make authoritative decisions on the resolution of the issues. The review-and-comment role and the advocacy role have the highest potential for meeting these qualifications since both encourage participation and are oriented toward project issues.

Although regional transportation planning is the topic here, the most effective roles for a citizens' committee to play are oriented toward the project rather than the systems level. But how does this project planning help systems planning, which is done at a much larger scale? According to Manheim and others (4, p. 90), one answer to this question is

An examination of many transportation controversies leads to the conclusion that many of the problems are directly related to the inability of the present system planning process to explicitly deal with uncertainty and to effectively relate near-term programming decisions to longer-range system plans. System planning must focus not only on desirable master plans but also on implementation strategies.

Thus, strong citizen participation at the implementation stage can definitely strengthen the system planning process. If this is the case, how can the review-and-comment and advisory roles be used to best advantage?

The following recommendations will improve the effectiveness of the review-and-comment and advocacy roles at the implementation level:

1. A citizens' regional transportation committee must review A-95 cases on a monthly basis and forward its comments to the technical advisory committee. These comments should be submitted in written form and directed toward the project issues. Ideally, the committee's comments should deal with solutions to the problems of a particular case. Furthermore, the committee should follow up to ensure that its comments are given proper consideration and that they are acted on in one form or another. It will then have the necessary feedback to its input and will be able to initiate further action if it desires. For efficiency, each committee member must be given the appropriate material on each A-95 case well before the monthly meeting. In addition, it would probably be desirable to emphasize one or two cases at the meeting in order to conserve time.

2. The advocacy role can be strengthened in a similar way. If there is a given project in which the committee has a special interest, a consensus opinion on that project should be reached. The committee can then put its comments in a letter to the appropriate agency or agencies and ask for a reply to the letter. To make a strong case for its position, the committee must research the project issues and formulate strong arguments. If the reply is positive, no further action may be required. If the reply is negative, the committee can drop the matter, submit further evidence in support of its viewpoint, or go to a higher authority such as a congressman or senator.

It is my opinion that, if these two recommendations are carried out, the level of participation on the committee will increase. To achieve this, however, the roles must be carried out routinely and efficiently, and the community must be informed that the committee is performing these roles. Moreover, the successes of the committee must be documented and disseminated to

the public. Ensuring open participation on the committee is important; otherwise, the committee will be an elite group with a strong voice. Care must also be taken to cover regional issues and not focus solely on local issues.

The recommendations given above can improve the effectiveness of the committee in the implementation stage. However, effectiveness must also be improved in the earlier planning stages. If the long-range system planning process is brought down to the local level, more individuals will participate in the process because local issues will be brought to the surface. One way to accomplish this is to base participation on the corridor or subarea level rather than on the system level. This approach has been successful in special-purpose studies such as the Boston Transportation Planning Review (5) and could be successful for an ongoing advisory committee. Such an approach is definitely oriented toward transportation issues and specific projects. To make the best use of this approach, the committee can be divided into subcommittees that are based on one or more corridors. This will help to focus on corridor issues and thereby stimulate interest among local community organizations. Furthermore, this approach should strengthen the advisory and participatory-planning roles by relating them to corridor issues.

As previously mentioned, the scope of the participatory-planning role must be limited and well defined. Participatory planning is usually more effective in the later stages than in the earlier stages of the systems planning process. For example, it would be more effective in the alternative selection stage than in the goals and objectives stage. The corridor approach would also strengthen the advisory role by focusing on local issues as well as regional issues. For instance, the committee might develop goals and objectives for a given corridor that support the regional goals and objectives.

The success of the corridor approach is severely limited by time and budget constraints and by the difficulty in managing the process, but the approach could be attempted on a limited basis for one corridor or one project. This would still necessitate a large effort on the part of the planning staff and the transportation com-

mittee. Nevertheless, this model could help to improve the committee's effectiveness in resolving issues by focusing on the vital issues.

CONCLUSIONS

The effectiveness of a regional citizens' transportation committee can be improved by emphasizing the use of the review-and-comment role and the advocacy role at the project implementation stage. These roles encourage participation and contribute to the resolution of transportation issues. Since project planning is clearly linked to systems planning, improved citizen participation at the project level will enhance the quality of the systems planning process. The planning for the system as a whole can be further improved by breaking the system down into corridors or subareas. The citizens' committee would then be divided into subcommittees based on these geographic stratifications. This step would not only improve the review-and-comment and advocacy roles but would also strengthen the advisory and participatory-planning roles.

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Effective Citizen Participation: Public Search for "Democratic Efficiency"

Richard Yukubousky

The question of how to achieve the democratic goals of public participation without resorting to a process that is cumbersome, frustrating, and costly to communities and public agencies is examined. The concept of "democratic efficiency"—the ratio of citizen satisfaction with planning outcomes to public participation resources "spent" in the planning process—is proposed as an aid in the design of public participation programs that are both democratic and efficient. Simple dichotomies that describe the critical trade-offs between democracy and process efficiency are used, and strategies, interaction techniques, organizational devices, and support resources that have high potential for achieving effective participation are suggested. Substantial gains in democratic efficiency can be achieved through staff training, technical assistance for community groups, meeting preparation, and public participation in the design of the citizen-participation process itself. Several promising interaction techniques that

are not now widely used are identified for further research and development. These are citizen juries, assemblies to integrate subarea and area-wide transportation planning, and other structured interaction techniques.

Over the past decade, citizens, planners, and public officials have gained considerable experience in dealing with the complex issues of citizen participation in planning and decision-making processes. From a historical perspective, it has been a relatively short time since the question of whether or not citizen participation was desirable was being debated. Now concern has shifted to the question, How can we most effectively engage citi-