

Response

LAWRENCE D. DAHMS

Just as each of my friends here who are heads of state transportation departments probably do not want to be saddled with the responsibilities of their associates, I don't want to be saddled with the weaknesses and strengths of the other metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) because I have my hands full running my own organization, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). But I will in a moment refer to some of the things we do at MTC because as we consider the evolution of transportation planning, the MPO does have a role and MTC is an MPO.

A problem we have in this discussion is that the title, Evolution of Transportation Planning, is a wide-ranging question. What do we mean by planning? There are many different kinds of planning. Each of the speakers has picked on a different piece of it, so it's a little difficult for us to understand each other as well as perhaps we might. For example, I heard Bill Garrison make some reference to planning's heyday. I'm not sure planning ever had a heyday, to tell you the truth, because my perception might be a little different than Bill's as to what heyday it is we are speaking of. For the purpose of this session we are focusing on the planning generally referred to as the 3C process. Originally a mathematical model approach to transportation planning characterized this process and then with the advent of environmental concerns it became an effort to reconcile transportation development with environmental and social factors. If those were the two objectives that the 3C process was trying to achieve, it essentially failed in both instances.

In any case, I enjoyed Tom Larson's reference to Boulding's lack of belief in planning as the only thing that prevents it from being disastrous. That is not a very good conclusion for those of us who have been working on the fringes of planning for some time. I think that another way of looking at that statement is to say that we know that lots of decisions have been made in the past and in transportation a lot of very useful things have been happening. Bill referred to 99 percent of it as going very well. Maybe, but how many of the major decisions were influenced by the 3C process? That's the question.

Without trying to characterize exactly the kind of planning MTC does, I would like to refer just for a moment to our approach. President Reagan had a position with General Electric that put him in the public eye and led to his becoming a very successful politician. At General Electric they had a slogan (maybe they still do): "Progress is our most important product." Despite the adverse referrals to the concept today, I would say that at MTC, process is our most important product. I don't say that apologetically. In the United States we have a democracy that we're all proud of. Frankly, the democratic process is the most important product that we have in the United States. That's why we feel so good about the way we live in the United States.

But I do agree with Tom Larson that decisions drive the future, not plans. I would like to think that certainly our objective at MTC is for our planning process always to have a product and that product is always a decision. Usually they are small

decisions but occasionally there is a large decision. But in any case, every piece of planning work that we do has its objective of making an important decision at a milestone point. And our process is important because we have been fairly successful in achieving that objective. We are able to implement most of those decisions because we pay adequate attention to the process that is needed to secure needed agreement.

Nonetheless, despite my feeling confident about that conclusion, I would still have to admit that I often say to my staff that MTC is an experiment in good government. The jury is still out on whether the experiment is working or not. Why? Because our decisions are often seen as infringing on the ability of someone else to make a decision. The someone else is very often powerful. Our decisions can infringe on the decisions of congressmen, state legislators, local officials, transit operators, even the California Department of Transportation.

All of these actors appreciate MTC's advocacy function and to some degree they appreciate our planning process. Bob Datel referred to our partnership in the Marin 101 project, and I too am pleased with the way that partnership worked. We had a good process and made a good decision and it led to implementation. There are lots of good examples. But, despite the appreciation by most of these partners of our advocacy function, most of them are also hesitant to make the most out of the decision process that we offer them. Why does this hesitancy exist? It's largely political. But it's also because of professional reasons. Planners and managers appear to have difficulty building partnerships. In order to adapt to a new environment and a new way of doing things, we have to be willing to shed some old ideas before we can try some new ones.

I particularly enjoyed Tom Larson's reference to the principles that Kenneth Boulding enunciated. The issue of the illusion of certainty is an important one. Tom said it, but as a responder, I wish to emphasize some of the things that were said before. A major problem we have as planners and managers is pretending to our political bodies that we know more than we do. Certainly the reference to computer and mathematical models and the certainty that they seem to offer is an example of this problem. Too little of the frailties that are built into those models is acknowledged.

Certainly the point that broader agendas and an examination of values are very valuable planning exercises deserves emphasis. Again that reminder of lack of belief in planning is the only thing that prevents it from being disastrous.

Now we have to shed some of those old concepts in order to adopt the new ideas and attitudes that are needed in order to be more productive. Tom suggested using the National Environmental Policy Act as a process for identifying and resolving issues rather than taking it as a challenge to be overcome. That's a very important concept and one that has to be understood. It's something you cannot give lip service to. Another point is that planning must now be considered a function of management and not something undertaken by staff for management. Again that ties in to the notion that planning is to support

decisions. Managers are to be making those decisions. It's a generic function; it's not a side issue.

So these kinds of concepts have to become inherent in the way we do business. They cannot be something we don't understand or give lip service to.

Frankly, I don't think very many managers or planners understand that. Until these concepts are paid some attention, we will continue to have the dubious distinction of supporting planning that is not dangerous because it's not taken seriously.

Summation: Transportation Planning—When Are Things Going to Get Better?*

THOMAS B. DEEN

When Tom Larson asked me to moderate and summarize this session, he assured me that all the panelists would be in agreement and that it would be a fairly straightforward task to synthesize the main thrusts of the panel. Fortunately, Larry Dahms has just distilled this summary and it would be redundant for me to attempt the same thing. Clearly, transportation planners today are a disconsolate bunch of folks. By their own testimony, their plans and their methods, if not themselves, are in disrepute. They stand indicted and vulnerable to charges of insensitivity and nonresponsiveness to orderly shifts in public perspectives and policies that any other profession would have easily accommodated until today their superiors sometimes question their continued visibility.

Frankly, I agree with this assessment, but having done so, I see no value in dwelling on it. Since I was committed to spend 15 minutes bringing this session to an appropriate close, I was about to despair last week when I decided to send the panelists' papers to an old friend and colleague, a former transportation planner whom many of you may remember. His name is I. Seymour Goodplans, formerly director of transportation planning for Metropolitan Gobblers Gulch, located in one of the states in the South-Midwest. (I think he has a brother-in-law named Goodwrench who works for General Motors.) Anyway, Seymour quit the planning business in 1978 to become a bookie; he simply wasn't making enough money as a planner.

After waiting a few days for Seymour to read the papers, I gave him a ring and after a few introductory pleasantries, I asked, "What did you think of the papers I sent concerning our recent history of transportation planning?" Now mind you, I believe little if any of what Seymour had to say, but he was so provocative and since I couldn't think of anything else to say I would like to spend the next few minutes giving you an overview of our conversation.

"What did you think of the papers?" I asked.

"Well, frankly I thought they were ridiculously

pessimistic. All the crying about poor methodology, bad models, pressure from the Feds, the naivete of the MPOs is so much nonsense. You sound like the L.A. Raiders explaining why they didn't do better against the Redskins in the Superbowl, or like Gary Hart explaining his poor showing in the early primaries. The truth is that planners have just completed the equivalent of a hole-in-one but instead of basking in self-satisfaction they're carrying on like they just lost the war."

"But, Seymour," I explained patiently, "you probably don't realize that since you left the profession, transportation planners and the whole planning business have fallen on bad times. The management of the industry scorns planning, is cutting planning budgets, ridicules its methods, and points to all kinds of irrelevant and obsolete plans as proof that planning is not worth the effort, nor are the planners for that matter."

"The problem with you planners," said Seymour, "is that you can't see the forest for the trees. You've got to get away from it all and look back to get a proper perspective. What do you expect of yourselves? The facts of the matter are that over the past few decades you and your colleagues have built 95 percent of the biggest public works project in the history of mankind--the Interstate Highway System. The system works! It's got continuity, lane balance, and the interchanges work beautifully, for the most part. What's more, they mesh well with local streets and you must have done something right with respect to location--why else the increases in land value and urban density that I see in lots of locations. Without the powers of Napoleon, or even Robert Moses for that matter, you squeezed the system into a crowded urban fabric in a few short years. You had to be pretty good just to keep from wiping cities out. What's more, the system's accident rates went into a free fall--there are thousands of people alive today that would have been dead if you hadn't done your job. You've got increased mobility plus economic benefits running out of your ears, but instead of cheering, you're crying."

"But," I tried to interrupt.

"Hold on, I'm not through. On top of building the interstate, you simultaneously were handling the

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