

Strategic Planning for Transit Agencies in Small Urbanized Areas

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An approach taken by the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) to strategic planning for a transit agency in small urbanized areas is presented. The impetus for the project was the requirement of Florida Department of Transportation that all recipients of public transit block grants prepare a transit development plan. CUTR defined its role as organizing the relevant information needed to develop and support a strategic viewpoint. Information on perceptions of the transit system was sought from three groups: current riders, nonusers, and community leaders. Different techniques, including interviews, focus groups, and on-board surveys, were used to elicit information from these groups. The main advantage of this three-pronged approach was that a full range of perceptions and issues was identified, resulting in sound recommendations that reflect a clear strategic direction.

An approach to the development of a strategic plan for a small transit system is described. The state of Florida requires all recipients of public transit block grants to prepare a transit development plan (TDP). In interpreting how this requirement is to be met, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) has described the ideal TDP as a reflection of a strategic planning process (1). Salient plan characteristics include an exclusive concentration on transit, an emphasis on transit's role at the community level, and explicit consideration of external factors affecting the viability of the transit system. The most noteworthy aspect of the process is that the state is encouraging the transit properties to go beyond routine service and financial plans to incorporate strategic considerations.

This paper is intended to demonstrate ways in which elements of strategic planning may be incorporated into the TDP. As an example, the approach used by the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) in preparing TDPs for three transit agencies in small urbanized areas is discussed, and strengths and weaknesses inherent in this approach are evaluated. Although the focus is on the process as opposed to the results, the concluding section presents sample findings and suggests measures by which the ultimate success of these plans may be judged.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND TRANSIT

One intriguing aspect of the TDP process is that it encourages a transit manager to step back from the all-encompassing day-

to-day operating concerns and take a longer view of the transit system. Strategic factors that affect an agency's long-term success may be summarized in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (2). There is no single correct formula for carrying out strategic planning, but a checklist of related processes and issues prepared by TRB's Committee on Strategic Management is a useful starting point. The checklist includes the following items:

- Organization mission: What is the agency's purpose? Where does it want to be in 5 years?
- Environmental scanning: What role do factors outside the agency play in its ability to achieve its mission? What effect might external trends have on the agency?
- Market analysis: Who are the customers? Who might be customers in the future? Are there markets currently unserved? Can the agency identify new markets? Is the agency oriented toward its customers?
- Strengths and limitations: What does the agency do well? What aspects of agency performance are not adequate?
- Stakeholders: Who are the agency's friends? Who cares about whether the agency is successful? Who are its enemies?
- Opportunities and threats: What areas can lead to future growth and success? Are there factors that threaten the agency's ability to carry out its mission?
- Critical issues and strategies: What areas are essential to the agency's success? Which strategies should be pursued?
- Strategic management: In what ways is the agency changing? How can change be managed?

Most transit agencies do not routinely consider these issues in their day-to-day operations. Some may have adopted a mission or goal statement, and a few may consider trends and markets, but more immediate crises tend to crowd out long-term concerns.

A major challenge facing transit is that it is often viewed as a social service instead of a travel option. This is especially true in smaller, less dense urbanized areas with little traffic congestion and no parking problems. The effect of the automobile on urban form has heightened this perception. As urbanized areas become more suburbanized, the automobile is increasingly seen as an absolute necessity. The perception that transit is only for those with no choice is a natural outcome.

This perception has serious strategic implications for the transit agency. The agency is confronted with a limited market for its services, little prospect for growth, and few stakeholders. The TDP can provide a blueprint for recognizing and possibly changing negative perceptions. By focusing on the

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needs of transit, the TDP can also counter the tendency of comprehensive plans in smaller urbanized areas to emphasize highway projects.

DESIGNING A PLAN TO OBTAIN NECESSARY DATA

The TDP framework discussed in this paper is based on a methodology developed by FDOT (1). The intent is to construct a policy document that addresses strategic issues, considers mobility needs within the context of overall planning and development efforts, and includes a staged implementation plan to meet these needs.

The FDOT methodology recommends the use of several measures to quantify the mobility needs of an area, including community involvement tools such as surveys and public meetings. The data collection strategies used by CUTR expand on the FDOT suggestions; they were designed to provide a quantitative and a subjective basis for identifying mobility needs and developing the most effective strategies for meeting the needs. CUTR concentrated its data collection strategies on three groups: community leaders, transit riders, and non-users. The following strategies were used:

- Interviews with key persons. Appropriate key persons were identified by the metropolitan planning organization. Key persons may include local elected officials, department heads, business leaders, and civic representatives. The interviews are intended to identify policy issues of greatest concern, perceptions of existing transit service, recommendations for improvements, and the dynamics of existing organizational relationships.

- On-board surveys. On-board surveys provide valuable insights into demographic characteristics, travel behavior, and transit users' opinions of existing service. Demographic profiles of transit riders can be compared with characteristics of the population at large to identify more precisely the composition of the market market. Information on travel patterns, alternative modes, and frequency of system use clarifies the nature of existing transit demand. Finally, the user can offer unique and pragmatic insights into the system's advantages and shortcomings. In some cases, CUTR has also surveyed bus operators to tap their knowledge of the transit system and enlist their cooperation in the conduct of the on-board survey.

- Nonuser surveys. One innovative aspect of CUTR's approach is in the use of focus groups to obtain information on nonusers' travel decisions. The informal, open-ended nature of focus groups encourages participation and allows important issues to surface in the course of group conversation. The results of a focus group session are in no way statistically valid as a representation of the nonuser population, but focus groups excel in raising ideas and issues for further consideration.

The results of the interviews, surveys, and focus groups provided a clear assessment of transit needs. Other methods were used to estimate potential demand for transit, and to identify strengths and weaknesses. Peer review was used to gauge positive and negative aspects of the transit system. CUTR has collected and analyzed transit performance mea-

sures from around the country, with a particular focus on Florida systems (3). Peer review provides a quantitative assessment of the performance of a given transit system compared with similar systems elsewhere.

Taken together, the results obtained from these techniques form a clear picture of the role played by the transit system in the community. Strengths and weaknesses, community perceptions, system performance, stakeholders, potential markets, critical issues, and possible strategic directions are all identified through this approach.

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT IN TDP

The broad mandate of addressing the role of transit in the community necessitates the involvement not only of the transit agency but also of community members. Along with the interviews, surveys, and focus groups, a local review committee was established to provide public input and review reports. Community members contributed to discussions of goals and objectives, the on-board survey instrument, and recommendations.

A key to the success of each project was the involvement of the transit agency. For strategic planning to be successful, an organization must make a commitment to the process (4,p.128;5). Strategic planning by an outsider is a contradiction in terms. CUTR defined its role as providing the tools (data collection techniques) and in some sense the framework (a focus on where the agency wants to be in 5 years) for considering long-term issues. CUTR made a special effort to keep transit management informed at every step of the project, an effort that alleviated concerns about an outside agency dictating solutions without local input. This effort and the informal nature of contacts were major factors in gaining the involvement of the transit agency.

In small, automobile-dominated cities, the transit agency is often forced to work in a reactive mode, because few stakeholders are willing and able to exert power and influence on its behalf. Difficulty in mobilizing support was the major reason that many of the suggestions for improvements had not been implemented in the past. By its nature, the TDP is a means to gain support for transit. In its guidelines, FDOT emphasized the exclusive focus on transit services as a major distinguishing characteristic of a TDP. The plan has the potential to create a more level playing field in setting transportation priorities within the metropolitan area. This result is paradoxical from the strategic planning perspective. Despite the importance of local involvement in the strategic planning process, the fact that an outsider prepares the recommendations may carry more weight with decision makers and make implementation more likely than if the transit agency had made these recommendations itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The focus of this paper has been on the approach used by the CUTR in preparing TDPs for three small urbanized areas. Although not solely strategic in nature, the TDP incorporates

many elements of strategic planning, including

- Organizing mission and goals;
- Analyzing external trends, existing and potential markets, and opportunities;
- Identifying stakeholders; and
- Priority ranking improvements.

Recognizing that strategic planning cannot be done effectively by an outsider, CUTR acted as a facilitator in the process. Small transit agencies are typically understaffed and must focus almost exclusively on the day-to-day details. The long-range view is a luxury under these conditions. CUTR defined its role as organizing the relevant information needed to develop and support a strategic viewpoint.

The approach adopted in this project sought information from three major groups: local elected officials and community leaders, transit riders, and nonusers.

Interviews with key local officials provided insight into community perceptions of transit and identified stakeholders. On-board survey results defined demographic characteristics of riders, provided information about travel behavior and needs, and revealed riders' perceptions and attitudes toward the system. Focus groups with nonusers elicited reasons for this group's travel behavior and nonuse of transit.

Example Cases

This paper has specifically addressed the process rather than the results of the strategic planning effort. It may be useful in closing to provide examples of how this approach can lead to very different findings.

In one urbanized area, community leaders stated in the interviews that residents knew about the transit system but chose not to use it. In both focus groups, however, the first and most strongly expressed reason for not using transit was that the individual did not have enough information about bus destinations, routes, stops, and schedules. This finding strongly suggested the need for an information and marketing effort, a recommendation that would not have been developed from the interview results alone. Within 6 months of the plan's completion, the transit agency created and filled a marketing position.

In a second urbanized area, the interviews revealed a strong unwillingness to provide local funding for the transit system. A closer examination of the agency's financial status revealed a need to strengthen the financial reporting function to ensure

that community leaders had a clear understanding of fiscal needs.

In a third urbanized area, survey responses pinpointed service reliability as a major problem. This could be traced to the age of the bus fleet and the decline in spending for maintenance over a period of several years. Marketing issues were also important here, but service problems received top priority.

One weakness in the approach described here occurred in the goal-setting process. This was scheduled early in the project, before the transit agency had overcome its reservations about the usefulness of this effort, and resulted in little local involvement in goal setting. In subsequent projects, the goals and objectives task was scheduled later, after a cooperative relationship had been established and the interviews, surveys, and focus groups had yielded data on perceptions and problems.

The three-part approach to gathering information from distinct groups worked extremely well. Virtually all of the recommendations advanced in the final TDPs were identified through one or more of these techniques. Taken together, the results of this approach clarified community goals and policies with respect to transit, identified potential new markets for the transit system, clearly revealed transit stakeholders, highlighted critical issues, and delineated the strengths and weaknesses of the transit system.

The ultimate success of this approach is yet to be determined, but it is possible to outline how success might be measured. The TDP process should result in increased ridership (as latent mobility needs are met), improved customer satisfaction, additional funding for the system, and a better image for transit in the broader community.

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