Conference Summary

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The task of briefly summarizing a major conference is not easy. I will give a sense of the discussions at this conference and, in particular, examine critical issues and future directions of paratransit.

People attended this meeting with the hope that paratransit would be recognized as a viable transportation alternative, each person viewing paratransit from his or her own particular standpoint. At the conclusion of the conference, most seemed satisfied that the overall goal of recognition had been accomplished. However, many people were concerned about what recognition implies, particularly from their own potential involvement in paratransit. This is understandable given the number of different paratransit concepts and the many different actors involved in paratransit. Before the conference, people had talked primarily to other people with similar orientations. At the conference they were exposed for the first time to somewhat different or quite different orientations and realized that differences of opinion existed and had to be resolved. This is understandable and also healthy. I hope, however, that, as this resolution process progresses, we do not create such significant conflict situations that paratransit concepts become infeasible.

Many of the imagined conflicts, problems, and constraints are overstated. I am thinking here of 3 areas in particular: labor, insurance, and regulations. Many people were under the impression that, because of problems in these areas, it was impossible to implement paratransit services. What has become clear is that implementation is possible. It will take some work, but it can be done.

Much work is required to overcome the many problems that do exist in each of these areas, particularly those pertaining to regulation. Many existing paratransit services are illegal if obsolete regulations were enforced, and other paratransit services cannot be implemented because of regulatory constraints. Regulations that are outdated, conflicting, and inconsistent should be updated. Regulatory authority should be used as intended—for protection rather than constraint.

In this regard adequate education and information transfer are essential. I am concerned with information transfer at several levels. Many people have no idea what paratransit is or, worse, they think they know what it is. To some people paratransit is a ploy to reintroduce jitneys and destroy conventional transit; to others it is a dial-a-ride system costing $4 a trip; to others it is a mechanism of substituting lower priced nonunionized taxi drivers for higher prices unionized transit labor. People who advocate paratransit do not implicitly oppose conventional transit. Each has its role and both should be used to produce balanced integrated systems. Unless these misconceptions are corrected, we will have serious problems. Ignorance and misinformation are the greatest potential barriers facing paratransit.

We are just beginning to understand paratransit and should be extremely careful about generalizing, for paratransit encompasses many different services and applications. There are fundamental differences between the paratransit prearranged services (i.e., car pooling and van pooling) and more responsive dial-a-ride services. Differences exist between implementing paratransit service into a metropolitan area with existing transportation service and implementing paratransit service in a rural area with few existing organizations and little or no transportation service. Considering all paratransit services as a single concept can be as misleading as considering all conventional transit modes, such as local bus, express bus, exclusive right-of-way bus, light rail, and heavy rail, as a single service concept. The similarities and differences among paratransit services must be understood.

Information transfer at a microlevel is also important. It is unfortunate that people in Tennessee implementing the van-pooling program had to spend 4 or 5 months tracking down various insurance alternatives. In Workshop 3, as a result of having 15 people trade notes back and forth for 1 hour, everybody got a pretty good handle on insurance options. If somebody could go to UMTA and obtain this information in 10 or 15 minutes, it could save 5 or 6 months in the implementation process. Information coordination and dissemination are extremely important in speeding up and simplifying the implementation process. We need some primers on what to do and how to do it.

What also seems to come out is how little we know about what is going on right now. Repeatedly the comment was made that, as you look at an urban area, you keep finding out about new paratransit services and funding sources that no one was aware of. Before we start considering new applications and approaches, we should conduct a thorough inventory of what we have now and understand much better than we do what services are available, whom they serve, and the characteristics and the costs of these services.

Since paratransit services generally deal with individual customers, we know a great deal about who is using the system and where they are going; in conventional mass transit, we have only a rough idea of the characteristics of the users of the system. This detailed information provides a rather unique opportunity not only from a paratransit perspective but also from a transportation planning perspective. It allows us to get to users and find out their characteristics more easily than we could do otherwise.

One of the unusual things that came out of this conference is that we are not making a major push for new money. A note of caution was expressed: We acknowledge uncertainties; we ought to go slow, expand experiments and demonstrations, use an incremental approach, and not lock ourselves in. The questioning that is occurring is appropriate. On the other hand, it is important that some of the positive conclusions that came out of this conference also be stated. These include a strong feeling that the integrated system approach is the way to go in larger metropolitan areas and the recognition that paratransit can play an extremely important role with respect to special groups, particularly the elderly and handicapped, and with respect to rural areas. These conclusions should reach decision makers in Congress, in the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, and in the U.S. Department of Transportation—people who often are not aware of what goes on at TRB conferences. Some mechanism should be provided to get information before individuals who make budgetary appropriations.

I am troubled that a negative backlash might soon develop toward public transportation. Our credibility record is poor if one compares promises with results. Operating deficits are rising at an alarming rate at a time when public funding programs are being reduced, particularly at a local level. On one hand past experiences suggest that a cautious approach with respect to paratransit is appropriate; on the other hand, it is important that we use all promising ideas, such as paratransit, as quickly as possible to ensure that mass transit programs do not fall into public disfavor and suffer the same fate as public housing programs.

Three basic questions come to mind: How do we ensure that paratransit alternatives will be given consideration in the planning and resource allocation processes? How do we implement new paratransit services using private operators? How are integrated

systems developed using both conventional and paratransit services?

To ensure that paratransit alternatives be given consideration, UMTA and other federal agencies should put some teeth into the planning process. Very often in the past, people viewed planning merely as a necessary task to obtain federal funds. The transportation system management element can be an effective mechanism to ensure that urban areas consider paratransit alternatives, regulatory issues, and alternative providers of transportation.

The agreement expressed at this conference on using private enterprise where appropriate to provide paratransit service is surprising and gratifying. The basic disagreement seemed to be which private operators are eligible to provide such service. Some felt that such opportunities should be limited to existing operators. I must disagree with this. If there are responsible new entrepreneurs who are also interested in providing service, they should also be given an opportunity to participate. We have to encourage this type of participation.

The major pressure for implementation of paratransit services will probably come from existing private operators in urban areas. They are the people who should approach local designated agencies and request the participation of private enterprise in provision of public transportation.

Primary responsibility for coordination of transportation frequently resides in a regional transportation authority (RTA). The RTA is often so preoccupied with the operation of a conventional transit system that it is reluctant to encourage participation of private operators in the provision of service. A conflict of interest can exist where the RTA is functioning as both an impartial coordinating body and also as an operator of various transit services.

I hope that RTAs can broaden their roles, seek involvement with other transportation providers, and assume overall responsibility for coordination of transportation services. Many RTAs have already begun new activities, such as car-pool and van-pool programs and subsidization of private carriers for paratransit service. However, if the RTA is unwilling or unable to assume a more neutral position, then we must look either to other existing organizations, such as metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) or councils of government, or create some new organizational structures within metropolitan areas that can coordinate planning, regulation, funding allocation, and operations. That body would match providers of transportation services with those who need the service—the brokerage concept that was referred to at this conference.

Multiple operators, competition, and incentives are compatible with the concept of an integrated system. Not only are they compatible, they are necessary. Let me give just one example using car-pool, van-pool, and similar prearranged services. If a person is sick one morning and cannot drive a car pool or a van pool or if a person works late one day and cannot meet the car pool or the van pool, what alternative does that person have? This is a very real problem to ensure that people will make a commitment to these new services.

A guarantee could be made to car or van poolers who occasionally miss their service that alternative services are available, such as a sweeper transit vehicle or low-cost taxi service. The various service concepts then work in a complementary manner providing additional insurance and reinforcement to people who otherwise might make a commitment to the automobile option.

Considerable concern has been expressed about competition between paratransit and conventional transit. I am convinced that this concern is far overstated. Conventional transit primarily serves the CBD-oriented trip, which generally comprises only 10 to 20 percent of travel in a metropolitan area. Paratransit provides an opportunity to serve the other 80 to 90 percent of existing travel as well as to feed new people into the existing conventional transit network. Where services do overlap, intelligent pricing policies should ensure that they serve different markets. High-priced exclusive-ride taxis in the CBD serve different markets from those served by low-priced transit in the same area.

With respect to the federal role, several observations are in order. Many successful paratransit services have been implemented without the use of federal funds. These funds were not used for one or more of the following reasons:

1. The service was started before existing federal funding programs were available;
2. The program did not require major funding to initiate or operate; and
3. Too many delays and requirements were associated with the federal funds.

The UMTA section 5 funding program should assist many areas in the development of paratransit services. The UMTA Service and Methods Demonstration Program has been successful in encouraging paratransit experimentation and should be expanded.

UMTA's role in paratransit should not be limited to funding. Through the transportation system management, UMTA should ensure that each urban area considers and evaluates paratransit alternatives and the participation of private enterprise. UMTA should also disseminate information on experiences with paratransit services. There have been few criticisms of UMTA expressed at this conference. Constructive changes in UMTA during the past 2 to 3 years recognize the roles of paratransit.

UMTA has been the federal agency most involved with paratransit. It is however not the only federal agency involved. The Federal Highway Administration and more recently the Federal Energy Administration are active in car-pool and van-pool programs. The federal government must ensure that these agencies adequately coordinate their programs.

In many ways paratransit is acting as a catalyst for a reexamination of the entire urban transportation process, the planning process, the implementation process, and transportation management. If somebody were to say the existing process is terrible and we should sit down and reexamine it, I suspect it would not lead us anywhere. But paratransit is acting as a catalyst and forcing us to reexamine these issues. For example, we have stated that planning should be more focused at a community level, that it ought to be more related to implementation issues, that it must have a strong market and user orientation, and that it must consider issues such as regulation. Coordination and integration of services become central issues. All of these areas of concern are pertinent to urban transportation, not just to paratransit. The biggest benefit of the entry of paratransit into urban transportation might not be the paratransit service per se, but rather the catalyst for change in terms of everything that we are doing.