

Missed Opportunities: Institutional, Social, and Political Barriers to Governmental Responses to Energy Crises

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Ballot measures and initiatives recently passed by voters in several states are manifestations of a mood in the United States to limit the degree of governmental influence in our lives. Tax-cutting measures, spending limitations, and other attempts to control government activities reflect the public's lack of confidence in government's ability to provide solutions to a myriad of problems. This feeling marks a significant change in the attitudes that prevailed from World War II until the 1970s when it was assumed that government could and should find solutions to a host of economic and social problems. Although people now want less government, they still want the problems solved. They have simply come to recognize that solutions to the problems are best developed by those who must implement them—individuals, community groups, and corporations.

When faced with an energy crisis, people will find their own solutions to the problem with a minimal amount of assistance from government. They will only turn to government when they cannot develop solutions on their own or when obstacles exist that only government can remove. Governmental response to energy crises represents a series of missed opportunities—for example, government has failed to recognize the desire and ability of individuals, community groups, and corporations to solve problems on their own, and various institutional, political, and social barriers preclude government from responding to a crisis in an effective and efficient manner.

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Two forms of institutional barriers exist at the local level—government fragmentation and regulatory constraints. Because so many entities at the local level are involved in transportation activities, stalemates and indecision are common occurrences. Several factors point to missed opportunities for local governments.

One factor is that no mechanism exists at the local or regional level to provide comprehensive energy conservation-contingency planning. Counties and cities recognize that energy contingency planning cannot be done in a vacuum and that it must be related to other social, legal, and fiscal considerations. However, the proliferation of single-purpose agencies makes it difficult to produce comprehensive solutions at either the state or local government level. And where comprehensive planning organizations exist at the regional level, they tend to lack any authority to implement or enforce their plans. They are more often a convenient means for dispensing funds rather than for reconciling competing priorities and concerns.

In addition to the lack of comprehensive planning, transportation planning lacks a mechanism for coordinating the efforts of local governments and service providers. Although each metropolitan area possesses a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) to serve in that capacity, most MPOs are voluntary associations without any legislative mandate to carry out their plans or work. And when alternative coordination mechanisms are established to deal with a specific energy crisis (e.g., the gasoline shortage in Los Angeles in 1979), they often result in extensive and time-consuming agency approvals. Local governments must identify, prior to a crisis, what mechanism will be used for coordinated comprehensive planning and must ensure that each entity's role is clearly defined.

Regulations also serve as a barrier to the efficient development of contingency plans. Most states regulate the start-up and routes of private commuter bus operators.

Because of the length of time required for approval by state public utilities commissions of new routes (45-60 days in some cases), it is not feasible for private operators to supplement or substitute for public transit services during a crisis.

A similar situation exists regarding the use of jitneys. Many local governments have regulations prohibiting their use. Although jitneys provide an effective supplement to transit in certain corridors, the length of time required for local approvals precludes their use in emergencies. State and local governments must revise or streamline regulatory procedures to permit timely entry of alternative services during a crisis.

SOCIAL BARRIERS

While institutional barriers can be modified or eliminated, many of the social barriers reflect long-standing traditions or attitudes that are more difficult to change or influence. A significant reason why government cannot respond effectively to an energy crisis is the nature of our urban form. Our nation has made a conscious decision to produce a low-density urban environment consisting of single-family homes on individual lots. This dispersion results in two phenomena: (a) the inability to provide a sufficient number of carpool or vanpool matches to any given work location and (b) the inability of transit to efficiently cover many areas of a region.

Because of our desire for a low-density life-style, we have committed our society to the automobile. Rather than creating an image in which the automobile is used in a fuel-efficient manner, advertising and the media have made it socially acceptable to drive alone. The United States has created and perpetuated the image of the urban cowboy—the king of the road cruising in an automobile. We are conditioned to think that freedom and flexibility can only be achieved if we own and operate an automobile, and we look negatively at those who are transit-dependent. As a result of this bias, people tend to view any alternative to driving alone as a less-than-desirable mode. It is, therefore, very difficult to promote ridesharing as an energy contingency or conservation activity. People will reduce unnecessary trips and make adjustments in their driving habits before they will share rides. Through media and advertising, we need to create a positive image for alternatives to driving alone.

Another social barrier that government must face is the concept of the 9-to-5 job. The movement of large numbers of people to and from work at approximately the same time creates massive peaking problems, particularly for transit. During an energy crisis, the system cannot accept any additional demand. Flex-time or staggered work hours offer the potential for relieving the peaking problems somewhat. Although government may attempt to encourage use of these concepts, the actual implementation must be done by individual firms. And though it is a sound concept, implementation is often quite difficult. To ensure that flex-time or staggered hours can be implemented during an energy crisis, government needs to establish guidelines for employers to follow and to get employers to consider this as part of their firm's contingency planning.

POLITICAL BARRIERS

Governments suffer from a credibility problem. While calling for conservation or contingency measures to be

carried out by the public or employers, governments have failed to set an example by having or carrying out similar actions. Provision of free parking for all government employees, failure to have government employees develop (at a minimum) personal contingency plans, and the lack of aggressive implementation of governmental contingency measures have placed government at all levels in a position of being ill-prepared to deal with a crisis. During the gasoline shortage in 1979, many private employers were better prepared to deal with the crisis than either the city or county of Los Angeles.

This credibility problem leads to another barrier—even if government plans for a crisis, people will not believe government. So, carefully developed plans may prove to be inappropriate as people respond differently than government had anticipated.

Another obstacle to effective governmental response is the creation of special-interest groups, which has occurred within the past few years. Each of these groups represents a narrow constituency with its own parochial view on a problem or issue. As a result, elected officials find it difficult to develop broad solutions or programs. We have become a society that knows how to debate solutions but not how to discuss a problem. Confrontation and adversarial modes used by these groups make it difficult, if not impossible, to discuss individual perceptions of the problem and to construct solutions that satisfy a variety of needs. For local governments trying to develop contingency plans, this leads to the production of plans that reflect the concerns of the most-vocal interest groups.

In addition to a lack of credibility and to the demands of interest groups, local government officials (administrative and elected) harbor certain attitudes that serve as barriers to effective governmental response. First, there is an engineering-construction bias in transportation planning and programming. This results in solving problems or meeting needs through the development of capital-intensive services and facilities. These projects require extensive design work and lead time to construct or use. Government, until recently, has placed a heavy emphasis on increasing the

supply of facilities (e.g., roads or rails) or services (e.g., transit) rather than on attempting to influence demand (through marketing and advertising).

A second attitude held by many government officials is that transit must be very basic. Many officials find it difficult to spend public dollars to make transit as comfortable or as convenient as the automobile. The fact that many areas did not have attractive transit systems represented a missed opportunity to capture new riders during the gasoline shortage in 1979. Many riders who turned to buses were turned off by the poor quality of service and stock and have since reverted to their automobiles. Although ridership peaked during May and June, it has since declined and leveled off.

The final attitude possessed by government officials is, in many respects, the basic reason why government cannot respond effectively to crises. For every problem there is a program, and with every program there is bureaucracy that does not move quickly. By the time government finds the mechanism to coordinate its activities, debates the solutions to the problem, creates the plans to meet the problem, and establishes the bureaucracies to carry out the plans, the public has long since taken matters into its own hands and found its own solutions.

Government would be well served in taking a minimal role in responding to energy contingencies. Questions about the ability of government to respond decisively and quickly because of institutional, political, and social barriers abound today. However, the public mood raises questions about whether government should respond to them. This does not imply that there is no role for government, only that government should do the least necessary to facilitate individual responses to energy crises. It suggests that government must do a better job of identifying what the public wants and needs. It means planning with people, not for people. In doing so, government would be serving both itself and the public interest. If, however, government insists on assuming a larger role, it will only serve to fuel the current public sentiment to "clean house".

Selected Issues Related to Governmental Responses to Energy Shortfalls in the Transportation Sector

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The variety of energy supply and cost perturbations that have shocked the economy of this country (and others) since the early 1970s has gradually forced a serious rethinking of the way the transportation sector will go about moving goods and persons in the future. The unprecedented rise in the cost of petroleum-based fuel during 1979, where consumers saw the price of gasoline essentially double, has finally sensitized the traveling public to these concerns.

In the past, it frequently appeared that people did not really believe that an energy crisis existed; or they would accept that it existed while showing a strong reluctance to take any serious remedial measures. The recent political reaction to energy taxation in Canada, for example, and the consistently negative response to major increases in fuel taxes in this country, show the real difference between acceptance of the problem and some of the possible cures. The reluctance is to be expected given the energy-intensive tradition of the United States relative to other industrialized countries. This country's energy use per capita is more than twice that of West Germany, France, and England and almost three times that of Japan (1). An important factor in this wide gap is that the eight other industrialized countries in Europe plus Japan had an average energy consumption per unit of transportation output (e.g., ton mile or passenger mile) that was 60 percent lower than

that in the United States, while the averages for the other residential and commercial sectors were only 10-25 percent lower (1). Most of the transportation-sector differential is due to passenger travel, with U.S. citizens by using relatively heavy, energy-inefficient automobiles for 95 percent of their trips versus an estimated 22 percent for Japan (2). People in the United States have a fairly clear reason for underplaying possible crises and resisting substantial moves to alter energy use—to do so is to go against a strong tradition of carefree energy consumption.

When viewing the most recent energy shortage of 1979, one does not have to be an energy expert to realize that the responses made by various levels of government, especially state and local, were not much better than in the 1974 shortfall. A number of federal laws and regulations had been passed—and at least partially enacted—in addition to the establishment of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). A majority of the states made some attempts to improve their energy readiness. However, the bulk of these actions appeared to be more theoretical than pragmatic when it came to relieving travel pressures that the supply interruptions produced. The significant change in the level of financial support for mass transit operations, to a great extent caused by the 1973-1974 crisis, did alter the modal picture, or at least allow transit to hold its ground in some