

Financial Planning: Needs, Roles, and Relationships

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The goals of the first set of workshops were to identify how transportation planning, financial planning, and strategic planning fit together; determine what role the MPO structure or process can or does play in integrating the three types of planning; and identify the current relationships of financial planning, transportation planning, and strategic planning and the role of the decision-making process in implementing these plans. One problem was that the subject centered around plans rather than planning.

One workshop used a gaming simulation and role-playing technique with limited discussion of the issues. Their efforts, however, identified two categories of concerns in this planning process—those of "management" or decision makers, and those of the "technicians." On the management side, the major problem is how to be "fair and equitable." Managers have the difficult—if not impossible—task of assuring that allocations are equitable within constraints imposed by the states, the federal government, or other programs and regulations. Technicians, on the other hand, most often suffer from a credibility problem—the reports and plans they produce are often put on a shelf and never used.

The second workshop focused on four issues:

- Who is responsible for various types of planning efforts?
- What incentives are there for those groups to undertake those efforts?
- How can planners' credibility be improved?
- How can a financial planning or strategic planning process be initiated?

They concluded that more communication and interaction among the actors in all the processes were needed and that, in most cases, financial planning and strategic planning do not actually happen. Unless there is a real need to get somebody to take a different look at what is currently being done, the existing process is going to continue to shape the plans. In many instances, the private sector should take steps to get the process started. When employees cannot get to work, when shoppers cannot get to the stores, when development plans need transportation facilities and services, the private sector has a vested interest in ensuring that adequate planning takes place and in initiating that process.

The third workshop group concentrated on assuring that meaningful interpersonal relationships were developed among planning participants. The success of those relationships is often gauged by the credibility of the products of the planning process and by the environment and atmosphere in which decisions are reached. The group felt that important ways to unlock creativity include assisting elected officials and citizens to participate fully and developing sharply honed listening skills within public agencies. Without active sharing of ideas and concerns, the transportation planning process often becomes routine and supportive of doing things the way they have always been done. To initiate and continue an integrated financial, transportation, and strategic planning process, the "what if?" questions

should be asked and answers should be honestly sought. In this same vein, it is often difficult to find neutral turf on which to negotiate major issues once they have been identified. Even MPOs are not always viewed as neutral. The group identified temporary task forces and negotiations conducted by professional mediators as possible alternatives to the MPO or other usual forum.

Finally, the fourth workshop tried to answer the eight questions that had been posed at the beginning of the session. Participants discussed the planning process itself and reached the following conclusions:

- The planning process should be from the bottom up. It cannot be imposed from above or the desire and willingness of the actors to participate in it will be lost. It needs local problems and issues to solve; it needs concerns to which participants can relate directly.
- Common goals among all participants and governments are necessary to integrate the financial, strategic, and transportation processes. The benefits to all actors must be clear.
- The financial planning process should be used to place realistic limitations on the transportation planning process because of the limited availability of financial resources. Although this is what the group apparently concluded in this first workshop, subsequent discussions have pointed out the need for interaction between financial and transportation planning—it is not a one-way street. Transportation and strategic planning can be effective mechanisms in allocating those scarce resources.

In conclusion, there did not appear to be a single set of conclusions or recommendations common to all groups, but maybe some general conceptions were beginning to be formed:

- Transportation, financial, and strategic planning should not be done in isolation; they should be part of a larger, integrated, interactive decision-making process.
- The process and structure provide a forum where various issues can be formulated, discussed, and developed; it may not be the best forum in all regions in all circumstances, however, and efforts to force the process to operate within the organization may meet with failure. The role of the private sector may be to provide the focus, expertise, or neutral ground necessary to effectively initiate a new process.
- Interpersonal relationships can be critical in any planning efforts, and situational and environmental conditions can affect the outcome of even the best-made plans and process. A single individual can mean the difference between success and failure of the process.

Maybe the process (planning) is more important than the product (the plan).