

OVERVIEW OF BREAKOUT SESSIONS

The presentations that occurred during the initial phase of the mid-year workshop provided important direction regarding major issues that public transportation is facing in a changing environment. Through a series of breakout sessions the workshop participants further defined these issues along with barriers and potential solutions to address these issues. The breakout sessions focused on three major themes:

1. Planning - Methods to Meet Future Markets,
2. Management - Converting Challenges to Opportunities, and
3. Funding - Responding to the New Environment: ISTEA and Beyond.

For the breakout sessions, the workshop participants were divided into groups of approximately 15 each. Each "group" then discussed the three key themes in separate breakout sessions. The discussion for each theme was led by a facilitator, thereby providing a continuum for each of the major themes. Following the sessions, the facilitators documented the breakout results and presented major findings on the closing day of the workshop.

PLANNING — METHODS TO MEET FUTURE MARKETS

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The topic of these breakout sessions was "How Will (or Should) Transportation Systems Change the Way We are Doing Business to Meet the Changing Needs of the Marketplace?"

Issues and Barriers

- Plans and planning processes lack credibility and buy-in and are difficult to implement.
- Plans do not always do a good job of balancing the needs of and serving their many publics, because the planning process and outcomes are often compromised by political concerns and because regional planning is complex and fragmented.
- Plans and their underlying assumptions are complex, technical, and difficult to explain. It takes too much time to get everyone on the same page. People can't support what they don't understand; this makes implementation difficult.
- Planning is perceived as academic, outside the role of managing and providing services. Planning is stereotyped as "analysis-paralysis." Planning time is resented because it takes away from "productive" time.
- Plans are often prepared to meet the *funder's* requirements and not management's requirements. As a result, plans are often NOT designed to be implemented, thus reinforcing the stereotype.
- The public process in planning has gotten out of hand.
- Contentious public hearings are often the norm, masquerading for participation. They often do not give good results or represent the majority of the community.
- There are unrealistic expectations for reaching agreement, especially when public interest groups are unwilling to compromise.
- More time should be spent with the different stakeholders in the planning process — not just the vocal ones.
- NIMBY (*not in my back yard*) and other attitudes bring public policy processes to a halt or help to make planning outcomes the lowest common denominator.
- Elected officials are not willing to be associated with unpopular decisions, no matter how great the public benefit.
- Elected officials do not to take the time to understand the issues and then make the tough decisions.
- Planners are not trusted or respected by transit operators and others who are responsible for living with the results.

- Planners are perceived to be elitist, uninformed, and callous and indifferent to the day-to-day problems in the "real world" and to the unique challenges faced when plans are implemented.
- Nonplanners believe that planners think they have all the answers and that the process is merely token; planners give the impression that they would rather develop solutions in sterile environments and not get their hands dirty.
- The functional areas of most agencies still reside in their individual silos with little, often ineffective communication between functions. This reduces communication, trust, and effective planning and implementation. The competition, political jockeying, and lack of coordination between planning agencies and operating entities continue to reduce the effectiveness of both.
- The power, identities, and potential impacts of transportation have been badly fragmented — bus vs. rail, transit vs. highways, ground vs. air vs. water, people vs. goods. And funding methods have strengthened and institutionalized these separations.

Solutions

Planning must do better at identifying, understanding, and serving its many publics:

- Improve credibility, broaden participation and increase buy-in.
- Improve the process of soliciting and integrating community input by ensuring that it is not merely a token effort of what is required.
- Demystify and open up the process; get input earlier; have stakeholders help define their own criteria for a successful outcome; increase education, training, and development for planners and participants to enable all to participate effectively.
- Balance "too many people" and "not enough people" with the "right people" involved in developing the plans.
- Identify, quantify, and manage expectations; clarify and communicate roles and responsibilities.
- Focus resources and action where they can be the most effective as defined by both the customers and planners.
- Allow others — even another government agency — to take the lead if they can better meet customer needs or implement the plan more effectively.
- Continue to experiment with strategies and techniques to solicit input, promote buy-in and generate public participation and support, including one-on-one interviews, small focus groups, telephone surveys, electronic Delphi's, and meetings with polling devices.
- Place a greater emphasis on understanding customers before launching service and quality programs.
- Have planners regularly ride the system and evaluate it from a customer point of view.
- Involve planners in product acceptance studies.
- Train planning staffs to understand their role in the process as facilitators toward a community's solution. Teach planners how to ask for input; how to listen carefully and methods to provide meaningful feedback to the customers.
- Work with management and policy makers to build commitment for consensus building, where the means can justify and support the ends, and where the ends do not have to equate to the lowest common denominator.
- Conduct periodic product acceptance studies to determine what riders, drivers, schedulers, etc. are thinking. What kinds of problems are they encountering on the system? What kind of image does the planning agency have? How are plans working?
- Improve the communication abilities of planners.
- Improve the speaking, writing, and presentation skills of planners.
- Teach planners to communicate technical information clearly and simply, with visuals, using commonly understood examples.

- Create more opportunities for planners to work with or in other functions.

Transportation planners and transit operators need to work together:

- Evaluate and reward planners for efforts to serve customers first, in order to improve public support, the overall efficacy of plans, and planning-operator relationships and outcomes.
- Get serious about implementing and stop talking. Change the incentives and definitions of good planning processes and good plans.
- Fund worthwhile projects that promote more collaborative planning and operations.
- Devise benchmarks that measure this kind of collaboration.
- Create more and better opportunities for cross-functional problem solving to occur. Have cross-functional people on projects sit together in the workplace.
- Work with management to build programs that involve both planners and operators in identifying problems and finding solutions.
- Convene work process and planning process improvement groups.
- Create more opportunities for planners to work with transit operators.
- Recruit and train planners with transit operating experience.
- Conduct cross-functional performance evaluations. Planning should be evaluated by the public and operators — and vice versa.
- Work with schools to improve planning programs so students gain more real world experiences.
- Rotate and cross-utilize planning staffs so they have one foot in each world.
- Require planning staff to move into the field and spend time operating a bus, scheduling buses, riding the system, and monitoring performance, etc.

- Have planners team with trainers in maintenance, and other programs to improve their knowledge and to share their experiences.

Planning must improve its models, methodologies, technologies, and outputs:

- Find new and better ways to involve the public in real and meaningful ways.
- Identify, quantify, and manage expectations; clarify roles and responsibilities.
- Look to other disciplines and industries for other tested and successful models.
- Conduct periodic studies in the communities served, to determine what the people are thinking, what kinds of problems they are encountering in using the systems, what kind of image the planning agency has, etc.
- Develop better ways to increase the timeliness and effectiveness of the planning process without reducing participation and input from the public.
- Consider using technology — for example, electronic polling — to help understand the perspectives and priorities of large groups of people and move them toward agreement.
- Increase the usefulness of plans.
- Make sure that plans address the real and pressing needs of the community as expressed and prioritized by its members.
- Provide ways for plans to be updated frequently, so they respond to the community's changing requirements.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a document on its clarity and brevity, not on the old axiom of "the heavier and thicker it is, the better."
- Make planning documents more "user friendly." Eliminate redundant or bureaucratic words and phrases. Ban acronyms. Use clear and informative titles and headers. Write in everyday language.

Transportation needs people at all levels to think more like "mobility managers" and less like "bus," "rail" or "highway managers:"

- Integrate transportation planning with the planning done by other entities, especially as public resources become more scarce and the public becomes more concerned about duplications, waste, and wise use of public funds.
- Build better bridges with other industries and within the transportation industry itself.
- Improve the ways transportation communicates its vision to the public and to policy makers. The vision needs to be benefits driven. The benefits need to be crystal clear and have long term value to critical audiences, especially taxpayers.
- Carry the transportation message more effectively to the public. Look at what anti-smoking advocates were able to do in 30 years. What must it accomplish in 3, 5, 10 years, in order to realize its potential in 30?
- Expand beyond the traditional set of allies. Consider how transit can build stronger, more effective coalitions with others, including unions.

Transportation needs to become more like a business, using business terms and tools, without losing its commitment to the transit dependent:

- Look at other industries and borrow strategies for increasing and retaining ridership.
- The airlines use frequent flyer programs. How might that work with bus or rail programs?
- The hotels use joint marketing with airlines. How might that work with local businesses or people who carpool?
- The financial industry has been very aggressive in identifying and direct mailing to their current and potential customers. Can we effectively direct mail to customers?
- Critically review, update and improve the benchmarks used to assess improvement and progress.
- Increase the transit farebox recovery rate beyond what is required; it is clear that operating subsidies will be reduced in the future.

- Publish benchmarks and progress throughout the company so employees have a report card and can understand what they can do to help.
- Go to school on marketing, market research, and product development.
- Start with current riders. What do they need? What do they want? What are they unhappy about? Make sure you retain riders by providing the service — routes, stops, and schedules — that they need.
- Ask past customers why they left transit and what can be done to bring them back.
- Define and clearly understand what influences the market's education, entertainment, and work choices; and then what influences their transportation choices.

MANAGEMENT — CONVERTING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

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The task of these sessions was to debate the management aspects in public transportation and to identify the issues, barriers, and solutions to consider relative to the changing environment that we've been discussing at this workshop.

Issues and Barriers

- Transit agencies lack focus and direction.
- Transit agencies often lack a customer focus.
- Transit agencies do not have clearly defined expectations for the organization.
- Boards or policy bodies often fail to provide a clear policy statement or direction to transit agency staff.
- Traditional performance measures, such as passengers per hour or cost per hour, are inappropriate for guiding many management decisions.