

going to be subject to lawsuits that may undermine the so-called benefits of MIS.

## **The Adventure of MIS**

*William W. Millar, Port Authority of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania*

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I am going to try to show why major investment studies are a dashing and bold adventure. I will talk about our experience with MIS, which comes out of the transit experience, the alternatives analysis experience. We are now leading one MIS and participating in a second.

### **MIS in Allegheny County**

We are trying to get transportation improvements done but also to carry out national policy, as identified by ISTEA, that says, "The National Intermodal Surface Transportation System shall consist of all forms of transportation in a unified, interconnected manner to reduce energy consumption and air pollution while promoting economic development." That is our national policy. I am just foolish enough to believe that if Congress said it and the President signed it, that is indeed what we ought to do. In Southwestern Pennsylvania, we take seriously our obligation to meet that national policy. Of course, we emphasize the words "economic development." That is a big issue in our community, where we had the dubious distinction of losing the largest number of jobs and the greatest amount of population of any major metropolitan area in the country between 1980 and 1990. So economic development is a big issue, and there are many people in our community who view MIS as an impediment to building transportation projects; i.e., road projects that will bring jobs to our community.

I do not agree with that position. I think the MIS process ultimately will help bring us the economic development and jobs our community desperately needs.

One observation some of you have heard me make about America is that we love to judge everything much too soon. Here we are more than two years since the Federal government issued MIS regulations, and what do we have? A conference to say how well MIS is working. Like any new process, we are not very good at it yet—at least we are not in Pittsburgh—but we are getting better at it.

## **The MIS debate**

In considering MIS, we have to be honest about what the debate is. Is it about MIS or is it about changing ISTEA? Do we believe in the national policy goals stated in ISTEA, or don't we? If we do, then major investment studies are a natural flow and a logical progression from those national policy goals. If we do not, then there is no way to convince you that MIS is worthwhile.

Fundamentally, MIS is like everything else: It is what you make of it. If we use it as a valuable thing, it will be a valuable thing. If we see it as yet another impediment to getting things done, it will be another impediment to getting things done.

A major investment study really is a means of reaching consensus on cost-effective transportation improvements that meet a region's goals and objectives. It is a process. To that degree, calling it a major investment study misleads, because what is important is the process we go through and its ability to bring people together. The ability to form consensus on what the problems are, find solutions, and then ultimately select the way we go forward is really the value of the MIS. The ability to bring people together is the key. It is important because, under ISTEA for the first time, we are required to make trade-offs. We want to be in a position to say that within the corridor the issue is not just a highway improvement but both a transportation and economic development problem, so we want to look at different ways of designing solutions to meet those needs. You simply cannot do that if the traditional highway people are doing their project development process, and the traditional transit people are doing their aid process and other processes that led to transit projects.

The public says, "We want transportation investments, but we want them done in an environmentally safe and cost-effective way." In public life, cost-effectiveness is in the eye of the beholder. It is clear that MIS provides us an opportunity to involve the public, learn from its ideas, incorporate them into our plans, and get the community's buy-in very early in the planning process.

These are the things that MIS is all about. It is the importance of MIS, and it is fundamentally rooted. You either believe in ISTEA, or you do not. There is no gray area. If you do believe in it, then ISTEA, what the MIS process represents, is the logical outcome.

## The Pittsburgh experience

Pittsburgh, so far, is having a positive experience with MIS. Its predecessor was really alternatives analysis. We did our alternatives analysis in a way consistent with the right way to do major investment studies: very early involvement of all potential stakeholders, working very carefully with a variety of agencies to come together on what the solution is, and then moving ahead to implement a project.

Our airport busway project is a classic example. The Port Authority's concept was a busway. It was a fairly simple concept, in our minds. Much credit must be given to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. Rather than ignoring it, as perhaps they might have, they asked themselves, how can this transit project help us to ultimately solve the transportation problems in the area? A joint partnership team was formed that involved our Regional Planning Commission, the Port Authority, PennDOT (both the district office and the central office), FTA, FHWA, local transportation planners, and other interested parties in a process that fundamentally changed the concept from a very simple busway to the airport into a Wabash HOV facility. It is a facility that will have much higher usage by the public, and it will give back much greater benefits because of that particular collaboration.

We were doing all this in the 1990–92 time frame when ISTEA was new. We did not know what all it meant. The Department did not know what all it meant. But we learned from each other and helped teach FTA and FHWA and gave them an opportunity to learn to work together and with us.

We ultimately obtained a sign-off on the environmental impact statement from both FTA and FHWA—which is certainly not the norm. It helped all of us who were new to the process work together.

Through that process we made significant changes to our project. The project is under construction now, and is much stronger for that effort. It did not come cheaply, and it was not easy. Our budget for the AA and DEIS grew to over \$2 million for a project that is eight miles in length. As big as those numbers may sound to some of you for that kind of effort, it is

resulting in a \$326 million investment. That is a pretty small price to pay.

We are now involved in two other major investment studies in Pittsburgh. One we call our “spine line” study, on which we are working with the regional planning commission. Our involvement in the second is simply as an agency participant; we are working with the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission and Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning on the Mon Valley Expressway. These two major investment studies show the difference in the new way of doing things. With the “spine line” study, we started out with a fairly simple, albeit expensive, concept to extend the light rail subway over to the north side of Pittsburgh, and then out to the east end where the universities and much of the medical community are located.

*“Do we believe in the national policy goals stated in ISTEA, or don't we? If we do, then major investment studies are a natural flow and a logical progression from those national policy goals.”*

We are a year into that particular study, and it is evolving. I cannot tell you what the outcome will be. It is a real credit to the MIS process, but it has made things very confusing. It has become harder and harder to explain the study to elected officials. It is

harder and harder to explain it to the interest groups who either did or did not want the subway. I doubt if the MIS will be completed this year. You cannot force an end to these studies, because they end in consensus and, right now, there is no consensus in sight.

The other MIS is one of those projects that has been on the books forever, called the Mon Valley Expressway. It is a 60-mile highway link between downtown Pittsburgh and Interstate 68, which is actually in West Virginia. Many people would agree that, if there is a need for capacity improvement in the area, a highway project is the probable solution—that is, if you accept the basic principle that something needs to be done. However, the northern 20 percent of the corridor is in the urbanized area and goes right into the heart of Pittsburgh. The highway project is proposed to go to downtown Pittsburgh, but the planners cannot find a way to get it into Pittsburgh.

Yet a number of things have tended to reinforce the Mon Valley Expressway as a highway project. For example, congestion mitigation studies are required. This has caused the backers to put a lot of effort into rationalizing this as an SOV facility. They already had

a commitment to the highway project, prior to the MIS. In fact, all the data has been developed and already says that this is going to require an SOV facility.

We need to think through the relationship between congestion management studies and MIS. Which comes first, and which influences the other? In this case, although the solution is predetermined by what many people want anyhow, it certainly has raised questions as to the validity of the alternatives analysis. It will be interesting to see how all of that turns out.

### Issues to be addressed

Let me summarize by emphasizing a couple of points. Major investment studies, as we are doing them in Pittsburgh, advance the goals of ISTEA. The value of MIS is a big question. But to use an analogy: At the end of this rainbow called MIS, there may not be a pot of gold. That is something we need to talk about, and it will have profound effects on how many of these studies get done, when they get done, and what reputation they have when they are done. Major investment studies are going to get blamed for stopping projects, and that is not the issue. Does MIS offer a real opportunity for broad intermodal options to be considered, or is it merely a cover for a predetermined solution?

On balance, major investment studies are a good thing. So far, they have proven to be very costly, and they do take too long. However, when you are building political consensus, as we must in modern America, you must accept that it takes the time that it takes. I am not optimistic that we can do a lot to solve that problem.

There is a critical question about the detail that should be required in the analysis at each step of the MIS process. Our "spine line" MIS, for example, has a \$2 million budget, which is a pretty large amount of money to put into a study.

I think the regulations allow for enough flexibility. But we are so used to being told how to do things that we are still cowering. MIS is flexible. Use the flexibility. Help your elected officials understand that there is flexibility to it. It is there for the taking if you want it.

Again, MIS, is just two years old. Let's give it a little time to grow. It is serving an important purpose.

To FHWA/FTA, I would say, "Keep it flexible." We need to work with the field offices to make sure they get it, too. FTA wants to participate, but it simply does not

have the staff to do so. That needs to be addressed.

What is going to happen after we have done a number of major investment studies and find the money is not there to build the projects? My prediction is that MIS will get blamed when that was not the problem in the first place.

### Major Investment Studies: Is the Vision Being Achieved? Can It Be? Should It Be?

*Neil J. Pederson, Maryland State Highway Administration*

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I come from Maryland, where we have 16 MIS studies underway. They run the full gamut from projects that were underway in the environmental impact study process at the time that the regulation came out, and had relatively minor retrofit issues, through several very large projects that were well along in the EIS process. They include new major investment studies in which we have a transit lead, some in which we have a highway lead, and some in which we are truly doing multimodal corridor studies. They range in size from one that is a 1.1-mile, two-lane bypass of a small hamlet in the most rural reaches of the Washington metropolitan area, up to the U.S. 301 study, which is a 50-mile-long multimodal corridor study with a 76-member task force that is not just advising us but actually guiding the study and making the decisions during the study process for us.

Though I support the MIS process and the principles behind it, I feel an obligation to at least raise some questions I have heard within the AASHTO community. I have entitled my presentation "Major Investment Studies: Is the Vision Being Achieved? Can It Be? Should It Be?"

### Some major questions

**Should we even have requirements to do major investment studies?** My conclusion is that the intention was right, but the execution needs improvement. If the view being taken is that we are primarily doing them to meet Federal requirements, then we are doomed to failure. If we are doing them because it is good transportation planning, then that is what we ought to be doing. That requires flexibility, particularly on the part of our Federal partners, FHWA and FTA. Unless we satisfy them on the MIS requirements, we will not get