PLENARY SESSION—Panel Discussion:
Management and Institutional Issues of MIS

MIS: What's in a Name?
Hank Dittmar, Surface Transportation Policy Project

There is discussion about the name, major investment studies, MIS. Should we change it? MIS is pretty good as an acronym because it makes you think about management information systems. I finally captured the meat of the MIS process and came up with "Muddling our way Into Solutions." That characterizes where we have gone so far and begins to frame the whole issue of institutional and management problems.

We are the implementers of MIS, the people who are hired to work on it, the people who are responsible for overseeing it, and the Federal agencies who oversee the process. All of us approach this as a job of overseeing a process and delivering a product. However, citizen groups, businesses, elected officials who don't serve on MPOs, those who are in the areas of a corridor study, and resource and permitting agencies come to the table for an MIS effort because what you are proposing to do in delivering the product, be it a study or a project, could affect them. It could affect their quality of life if they are citizens, the quality of life of their constituents if they are elected officials. It could affect—either positively or negatively—their ability to make a profit and pay their workers if they are businesses. It could impair or help their separate professional missions if they are water resources agencies or air quality agencies.

These groups have different reasons for getting involved, compared to the reasons we come together to do an MIS, whether we are from a transit agency, a State DOT, or an MPO. The recommendations we come up with as a result of an MIS are largely recommendations about meeting our goals in terms of delivering a transportation product. If we want to achieve some of the goals we have defined as important, we have to think about how we help people achieve *their* goals.

Implications of the process

Mobility and environmental goals are not incompatible but may be seen that way unless you start early in the process and acknowledge the legitimacy of the goals of all stakeholders.

First, this implies building a process that acknowledges and embraces the legitimacy of the goals of other participants in the process. It implies something very important about the process, which is ownership by the stakeholders in the process at every stage. That implies participatory decision-making rather than professionally delivered information or sales pieces. It means incorporating the implementing agencies and the permitting agencies, as well as citizen groups and affected business people, into the process in a formal advisory role. It is essential to begin the consultation process by formally going out and seeking representatives of the affected communities and doing so in a way that creates an open and legitimate process that engages communities in an advisory role and brings the stages of the project before them for their evaluation.

Secondly, agencies need to understand that when they ask people to become involved, they are asking them to commit resources. Resources are an important problem in terms of getting a legitimate process that involves both institutions and a broader base of people.

The resource question can be tackled in several ways. For the resource and permitting agencies, perhaps funds in the study budget could be set aside to compensate staff and pay their travel costs to participate in the MIS study. A similar action may be necessary for citizen groups. We have been criticized roundly by some for a project on which we worked with FTA to actually provide planning funds to citizen groups in some metropolitan areas to enable them to understand the dynamics of the transportation system and come together with the MPO and the State. The criticism hasn't really looked at what those groups have done—which is not to sue anybody over projects or stop projects but actually to begin to get involved in developing projects and ideas that they want to move into the planning and programming process. That is a positive outcome.

The investment of money in finding ways early in the process to give citizen groups the resources to understand the transportation system and how it works, and thereby become educated to your process, is an excellent way to begin. The right questions can then be asked early in the project to satisfy citizen groups, non-governmental organizations, and implementing institutions.

The third thing it implies about the process is that early involvement needs to take place in selecting and narrowing the alternatives you will consider.

The fourth is to ensure that an advisory committee sign-off is built in as part of closing the process. This assures that you actually go back to people after you talk to them and get some concurrence on the results.

What does this legitimacy imply about decision-making? If you are going to involve institutions that are not there to help you deliver a project, you have to understand that for them "no project" is an acceptable answer. You have to be willing to consider whether "no project" is an acceptable answer for yourselves. There is the need to acknowledge, discuss, and debate that question up front and do it openly.

About decision-making, it is important to think about structuring the alternatives you look at in such a way that they incorporate and reflect people's objectives from the outset. People come to the table with concerns about quality of life. Are there ways you can incorporate flexible design standards, open space set-asides, and calming in areas near the project? That buys you a lot of faith from people, and it gets you out of always having the public demand mitigation measures. Mitigation is an adversarial approach. You are saying, we are doing something bad, and now let's come back and sort of "band-aid" and redress it. If you can include quality of life as an integral part of the solution, it is better than looking like you are tossing bones to angry citizens.

Furthermore, in decision-making, one really needs to think about who is doing the study and how they are seen by the audience with whom they are working. Is the agency or team seen as people who can make neutral, unbiased decisions? It is important to strategize among the collaborators in the metropolitan planning process to make sure they see a balance in the approach. If you are hiring consultant help, make sure they are a balanced team and a team that is willing to consider all alternatives and will reach out to do that. The whole question of neutrality is vital for involving permitting agencies and the public, because their first perception is that you are coming in to deliver a solution that you have already decided.

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MIS as a tool for managing the system

If you want people to own the results, all stakeholders have to buy into the process from the outset. We need to look at the MIS as a management tool, as a tool for managing the metropolitan transportation system. We are emerging into a time where new major investments are the exception rather than the rule. The rule now is maintaining and managing an existing infrastructure and providing limited additions to the infrastructure to allow it to operate and perform at maximum efficiency. The MIS needs to be seen contextually as a tool for managing the system and not just as a tool for project approval. The management question is how the MIS helps you deliver on those goals and objectives.

STPP has done focus groups and held a lot of discussion with members of the public about metropolitan and suburban transportation in the last year. We hear a high level of dissatisfaction about transportation. It really comes down to a public attitude of "They are always digging up our roads or building on our freeways or building on our transit systems. When they get done, it is just as bad as it was before they redid it. And now they are coming back and want to do it again! Why are they always working on it, but it is never fixed?"

MIS must be a tool for answering people's questions of how these improvements are going to make their lives better in terms of time saved, quality of life, getting to the store, getting the kids to the soccer game, or to wherever it is that people are going.

It is important to go beyond capacity issues, to include safety, economic development and urban quality of life and access for citizens that don't currently have access to jobs or opportunity. We want to frame goals collaboratively with our partners and set forth achievable measures we can look at and talk about even if they are qualitative.

Another thing management must not forget is how actions proposed in a specific corridor of an MIS relate to the transportation system as a whole. All too often, we do not go back through the process and say, "How does this affect trip-making in other parts of the region?" We often don't look at how this affects access to other systems, whether it is the social service system or employment nodes within the region.

Finally, the MIS is a management opportunity to communicate with a broad group of the public. It is hard to get people involved in a long-range plan and, as planners, we think the long-range plan should solve everything. People don't show up until the problem comes down their street, so you need to look at MIS as an instrument for communicating broad goals and objectives and being relevant to people, and not use it as just another planning tool.

MIS: "Warts" and "Beauty Marks"
Ysela Llort, Florida Department of Transportation

The decisions we are making are not just about investments. They are about how to make decisions—and that is a different perspective.

The one thing MIS has done for us is bring transportation decision-making into the public arena. In the past, a lot of people believed transportation decisions were made by planners in dark rooms. Somehow transportation projects appeared as spontaneous apparitions in the transportation program. All this has changed. MISs are now open forums where the process is collaborative and decisions are by consensus.

The intent of MIS

Let's talk a little bit about the intent of MIS. The best investment strategy is not just to find the best mobility and accessibility solution. The decision-makers and the decision-making arena have expanded so tremendously that it is difficult to define "best" when everybody uses different criteria and has different goals and objectives.

Achieving consensus, determining the financing and staging, and assessing the investment strategy are major time consumers in an MIS. In Florida, it has taken us about three years to get through an MIS, and we cannot yet tell whether those are three years that have shortened the process in the long term, or whether it has simply added three more years.

One thing we know for sure is that in this day of consensus-building through an open process, we don't think it is ever going to get shorter. And frankly, we are comfortable with that. We are more concerned about getting the consensus and making the right decisions than we are about making a decision quickly.

One criticism of MIS is that the outcome may not be doable, and that is okay because that is a decision the community makes. Another criticism is that perhaps it is just another study we are using as a last resort. Is the MIS one study in a long line of studies?

We know there are a lot of warts and beauty marks in this process. (See Figures 1 and 2.) The issue of modal favoritism continues to be one wart. Who should convene the process? Should it be the MPO? Is an MPO modal-neutral? Can a transportation agency be modal-neutral? Should we worry about modal neutrality, or should we worry more about the ability to administer a wholesome process?

Figure 1

MAJOR INVESTMENT STUDIES (MIS) "Beauty Marks"
- Causes state & local transportation agencies to work together
- Develops multimodal alternatives
- Involves business community
- Sets long-range direction for financing/ development
- Develops advocacy groups for the MIS

One of the difficulties we all face, particularly with politician term limits and a very mobile community, is that the people who are here today are not here tomorrow. Since our process takes such a long time, there needs to be a continuing way to keep people involved. MIS is not about taking a one-time shot. It is about maintaining a consensus in a decision in a public arena and resolving the roles and turf battles. The issues of MIS and the problems of MIS are not technical. They are organizational, and they are consensual.

MIS has thrust us into working in teams, which has brought about an interesting issue of how to work on other non-MIS projects and decisions. Are we going to reorganize our whole planning and decision-making process or have a separate process for MIS than we do for other projects? We know that somehow we have got to lace the department's entire range of planning and environmental activities together.

How do we de-mystify transportation planning so that local elected officials can become actively engaged in a planning process that is meaningful to them? This is