

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

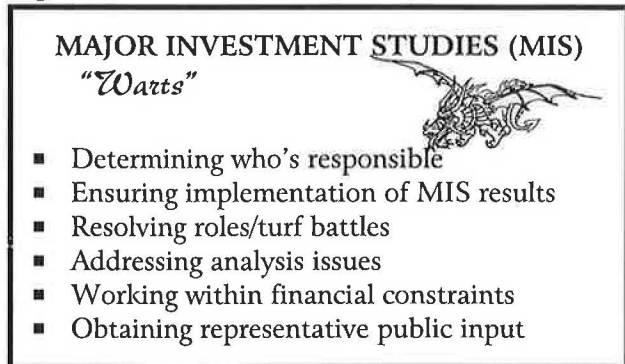


One of the difficulties we all face, particularly with politician term limits and a very mobile community, is that the people who are here today are not here tomorrow. Since our process takes such a long time, there needs to be a continuing way to keep people involved. MIS is not about taking a one-time 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

Figure 2



more important when you are trying to deal with citizens, because they are not only interested in transportation, they are also interested in education, public safety, and numerous other issues. If we make transportation planning too complex, we will lose them.

In Florida, we think that the strength of the MIS process is the fact that we focus on financing. One of the warts of this whole process has been that none of us are really well-equipped to handle public input. The old traditional method of citizen involvement simply does not work. In Florida, we have spent a lot of time and effort evaluating our public input process, and we know that we cannot continue to get the public to attend transportation meetings one by one, because we are stretching the time limits that special interest groups and the public have to devote to such activities. We need to find a better way to get to their involvement and input.

This might mean using joint sessions with PTAs, PTOs, and others who have a very good grassroots way of getting to local municipalities and local residential areas.

One of the beauty marks is that State and local agencies are working together, and that has been an amazing institutional development. We have spent a lot of time learning about each other's processes and learning about what is important to each other. In Florida, within the MIS process, we have memoranda of understanding that we put together with all participants. Those memoranda set forth what the groups have agreed to regarding the study scope, their involvement, timing, responsiveness of each agency, and what is expected of them in terms of being able to review information and get it back to the group. That has been most helpful.

Developing multi-modal alternatives is a great beauty mark. This is one of the things we do in a systemic way and include in the system plan.

The great beauty mark is realizing that the business community is key to implementing transportation projects in a time when you have few resources. We have become more and more involved in marketing to the business community. By marketing, we mean sharing information, analysis, outcomes, and alternatives. This is how we will be able to improve transportation in the future because the business community certainly is interested in economic development.

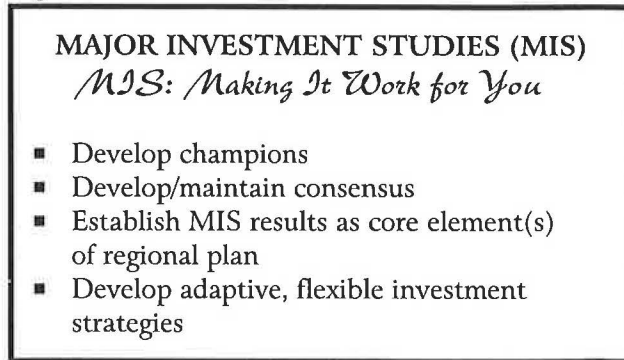
Developing advocacy groups for an MIS is important. Getting more people involved does not always result in getting needed support for a decision. Even then you may lose the support because the situation has changed.

Making MIS work within existing processes

So how do we make MIS work within the institutional management processes we already have in place? (See Figure 3.) We think everybody needs to develop champions for MIS. It doesn't have to be the institution that manages the administrative process itself. The champion can be a local business person. It can certainly be one of the agencies involved. But it needs to be someone with very high credibility within the community and someone willing to devote the time to make sure that the MIS can become a reality.

We must be concerned not only with *developing* consensus but also with *keeping* consensus. How do we keep consensus? What type of superstructure do we need to maintain the drive behind the MIS? How do we maintain the consensus as we move through these uncertain economic times?

Figure 3



Definitely the MIS must be a core element of the regional plan. We must simplify and tie in the two processes. We must find a better way of talking about

these processes and what they mean when we present them to the community. Then the public can understand what it is that we have been trying to do.

Finally, we must develop and adopt a flexible investment strategy. A project is not going to come to fruition for five or six years. In that time, the financing situation might have changed.

Major investment studies are not truly all that new in Florida, and the commitment to this process did not start with MIS. It started with what we call our master planning process. However, the master planning process was definitely more inclined to look at just interstate corridors, and the public participation aspect of them was not very comprehensive. Therefore, we have had problems with projects in the pipeline. We have had to go back and figure out what the differences are between the old master planning process and the MIS.

In the last 10 years, we have spent about \$35 million on both the master planning and the MIS processes. When you have \$35 million riding on such processes, you had better figure out a way to have them give you sufficient value added—because if you do not, the public will be after you.

So we are very serious that the way to achieve good value added to the planning process is to move from the old technocratic approach to transportation planning into this new, inclusive, collaborative, flexible method of doing business with the community.

MIS: Lessons to Be Learned

Les Stermann, East-West Gateway Coordinating Council

While I am a transportation planner by training and experience, my role now is primarily administrative. I report to a group of chief local elected officials: the mayor of St. Louis, who is our vice-chair; the county executive of St. Louis County; and their counterparts throughout an eight-county region. These individuals do not care much about many of the technical and procedural details we will talk about at this conference. They want to know how and when they will get the information they need to make decisions. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on me and the people who work for me to produce that information fast and accurately and get it in front of decision-makers as soon as possible. Since we have a number of critical MISs in progress, I have become almost obsessed with the time-

liness and responsiveness of the process. I would like to tell you about some things we are doing to try to improve that process. I hope there will be some lessons others can draw from it.

One thing we have all agreed on is that a good MIS requires collaboration. Sometimes we call it partnership. Sometimes we define collaboration as “holding a meeting.” Since the passage of ISTEA, we have done a lot of collaboration by almost any definition. True partnership calls for some real changes in the way our institutions and levels of government relate. We need to re-engineer these relationships.

There is the continuing frustration that we hear from at the national level about our inability to get things done. We are having trouble getting to the end of the planning process, making decisions, and generally accomplishing the goals our constituents expect from us. In the MIS context, there are complaints about the cost and time involved, the cumbersome nature of the process, and the fact that, even within our organizations, planners and designers do not seem to relate.

All of these things are symptoms of difficulties in the collaborative process. Our relationships must really be re-engineered from what they have been over the last 30 and 40 years if we are going to truly make MIS work.

The St. Louis experience

Let me tell you about some experiences in St. Louis that lead us to that conclusion. St. Louis is a large metropolitan area of about 2.5 million people, 8 counties, and 230 municipalities. We stretch over two States, Missouri and Illinois. About 80 percent of our population is in Missouri. We are divided into two Federal regions. We encompass a very old center city, mature suburbs, rapidly growing newer suburbs, and rural areas. Our area is truly a test of whether the collaborative decision-making process envisioned by ISTEA can really work.

I want to talk mostly about our relationship with the Missouri Highway and Transportation Department as an example of fundamental change in a collaborative relationship brought about by ISTEA, and about some of the difficulties and strains involved in fundamental re-engineering of relationships between institutions. It is a good case study.

Our relationship with the Missouri Highway and Transportation Department—which, quite candidly, was never one of mutual admiration—became one of open