

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*

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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

conflict after ISTEA. In fact, we came to a point shortly after its passage when we refused to program some major projects proposed by the MHTD in the St. Louis metropolitan area. This, needless to say, created great divisiveness between our organization and the State Highway Commission, which oversees the Department.

Sometimes that kind of conflict breeds cooperation and understanding, though it was hard to recognize such an opportunity at the time. As we picked up the pieces and reexamined our relationship, we and the MHTD agreed that if the projects the Department advocated were to move forward in any way, they must result from an investment analysis. This action came right after the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on planning was issued.

What we did was develop guidelines for investment studies that were the forerunners of MIS, and we actually adopted those guidelines as part of our TIP to assure local officials that, prior to a project being programmed, there would be adequate opportunity for analysis and input. Everyone then knew what work needed to be done to move a project forward.

Unfortunately, based on our experiences with those early studies, we and the MHTD came away very unsatisfied. Here are a few reasons why we felt that way:

1. Neither the consultants we used to do much of this work nor the staff of our implementing agencies understood the meaning and fundamental importance of problem statements. The MIS is fundamentally a problem-solving effort, and if we can't state what the problem is, we cannot do an effective analysis. We continue to struggle with that concept. The key to doing a good MIS is to develop a good problem statement and scope at the outset.
2. Many people traditionally involved in design and planning misunderstood how to seek and respond to public input. Public involvement was constantly confused with public information. Public information is getting the glossy brochure out, producing fancy slides, taking the road show to shopping centers, and handing brochures out to people. That is public information; that is not public involvement.

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3. Planners and designers from traditional unimodal backgrounds seemed unable to fairly define, let alone evaluate, multi-modal transportation alternatives. We seemed constantly in the process of setting up false comparisons from one alternative analysis to the next, proposing in some cases ridiculous alternatives solely for the purposes of satisfying the definition of an MIS.
4. The studies cost far more than anticipated and, unfortunately, when we reached the end, the outcome seemed no different than the one originally sought by the implementing agency. The problems of modal bias, the skewing of results—all of those factors affected the outcome. With each succeeding study, we had a new set of consultants or a new set of staff people, each trying to figure out what was really needed in an investment study. While we believed that we were clear on our scope and intent and our honest desire for change, in most cases we simply fell back on the traditional models of location studies and EISs.
5. The public was confused about how decisions were to be made. They did not understand who finally decides whether something is going to get built. Among ourselves, we pointed fingers at each other. We generated scores of meetings, but while we were *talking* to each other across the meeting table, we did not seem to be *working* with each other.

The bottom line was that we insisted on fitting MIS into the mold of "what we always do." No matter what we asked consultants or staff to do, they came back with a *location study*. Someone in an earlier presentation called it a "familiar paradigm." Reflecting back, we decided we were doing exactly what the public and elected officials told us *not* to do: build in another layer of studies that did little to

improve the quality of decisions.

### Conclusions to be drawn

Based on this experience, we and the staff of the MHTD simultaneously came to a number of important conclusions. First, certain tasks are simply best done in a unified manner by in-house staff. Public involvement is

foremost among those tasks. MISs deal directly with meeting the needs of our customers. If we don't understand what our customers think and what they want, we had better find out, because it is fundamental to the ongoing success of our agencies. We must develop effective, ongoing relationships with our elected officials, our public, and special interest groups, rather than reinvent those relationships for each MIS using a different consultant using a different technique. Lacking such relationships, we are doomed to failure.

Another element best done by in-house staff is the development of problem statements. Problem statements need to emerge from the long-range plan. Unlike a lot of other regions, when we in St. Louis identify corridors in the long-range plan, we do not identify any mode or alignment as a "place holder," because we think that builds bias into the subsequent MIS. Our strategy is to identify a set of transportation problems that cause us to identify a corridor for study. With a good long-range plan, it should then be fairly easy to craft a good problem statement to start off the MIS.

Activities such as demand estimation should not be done uniquely for each study either, especially when, as in St. Louis, there are multiple MISs underway simultaneously. There should be only one set of demand estimates and related assumptions for the region.

Financial capacity analysis is yet another activity that needs to be done region-wide, so that potential projects will fit into a common financial plan consistent with the region's long-range plan.

In short, multiple MISs should relate to each other on a system-wide basis by having some of these common elements done in one place, not many places.

Second, we concluded that the process could not really be fulfilled as we envisioned it without acknowledgment of flexible funding. We are kidding ourselves if we think we can make this process work without real flexibility in funding. It is like sending a child into a toy store with instructions that "you can have anything that you want in this toy store as long as it does not cost more than a nickel." That limits your choices, and that is what we have been doing in many of these studies.

Two weeks ago we entered into a memorandum of understanding with the MHTD to address these issues. It does several important things. First, it creates a transportation corridor improvement group (TCIG) that is jointly staffed by MPO employees and employees of the implementing agencies—in this case the Missouri Highway and Transportation Department. Ultimately, other implementing agencies will sign on and contribute staff. We have set aside space in our office for these people to work together. This group will manage all the major investment studies that are active in the region.

The TCIG will be responsible for scoping, problem definition, public involvement, financial planning, and demand estimation. It will be able to reach into each of

our agencies to utilize staff resources where necessary to carry out those tasks. We are putting people side by side and blurring the lines between organizations so that staff members are jointly responsible for getting the best job done. This helps keep our joint staff focused on doing the

best MIS and not feeling responsible, in the way they were before, to a single mode or special interests. Their only interest now is in doing a fair job. While this, in effect, is what the MPO was created to do, we found that this new model was necessary to build trust in the MIS process and assure adequate financing of and participation in that process.

Secondly, the agreement provides for a fully cooperative project programming process using procedures, processes, and criteria that come right from our long-range plan. In doing so, it commits everyone to the full flexibility and use of funds, with one major caveat: For any sponsoring agency to access flexible funds, it needs to fully subscribe to the principles of cooperative planning.

### **Specific principles of the St. Louis memorandum of understanding**

Some specific planning principles outlined in the MOU include (and these come directly from the agreement):

1. The transportation system should contribute to regionally desired outcomes of mobility, economic growth, fiscal and environmental responsibility, social and economic well-being, sustainability, and safety.

*"We must rethink traditional relationships between disciplines and institutions if we are going to effectively carry out the major investment study process."*

2. The customer is at the center of the decision-making process; hence, all plans involve a high degree of customer participation and information.
3. The performance of the multi-modal transportation system will be maximized by basing decisions on community objectives and related system performance measures.
4. All relevant transportation and non-transportation agencies must be involved in the planning process.
5. Clearly and precisely defined problems are critical to the development of appropriate and effective transportation solutions.
6. Consistent, careful devaluation of the full range of multi-modal transportation alternatives will ensure choices of optimum solutions to those problems.”

Of course, we also adopted standards for administrative cooperation to bring this about.

That will give you an idea of what we signed up for.

Looking back on this, who would have thought that two organizations that, a year ago, were at each other's throats, could come together in this kind of agreement? It is really pretty remarkable. For us in the St. Louis area, this is simply testimony to our shared deep frustration about our inability to get things done.

We know this kind of arrangement may not work every place. In fact, it may not work in St. Louis. It is one thing to sign a piece of paper; it is quite another to carry it out—which requires skill and competence and good will. The lesson here is that we must rethink traditional relationships between disciplines and institutions if MISs are to succeed.

Since major investment studies are simply good planning practice, why did we need a regulation to force us to implement such a practice? It is because of some of the institutional calluses that we have built up and the defense mechanisms we have in place, some of which we have joked about in our discussions during this conference. We too often fail to confront our institutional barriers. Yet, we are going to have to overcome those barriers that continue to divide us if we are going to effectively carry out the MIS process.