

Metropolitan Planning and Governance

STEPHEN J. DEL GIUDICE



Stephen J. Del Giudice is a member of the Prince George's County (Maryland) Council; he served as chairman in 1996. Previously he was a three-term mayor of Takoma Park, Maryland, and professor of clinical law at the Community Legal Clinic of The George Washington University's National Law Center. He has served in many regional planning advisory positions with the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Council of Governments.

The changing institutional arrangements in transportation that are the focus of this issue of *TR News* pose a number of challenges both to transportation policy makers and to the elected officials who are responsible for policy implementation. My perspective on the subject is that of a locally elected official who for many years has been involved in regional transportation planning as a member, and formerly chairman, of a metropolitan planning organization and a member of a major investment study/environmental impact statement committee. This experience has been both encouraging and frustrating: encouraging because transportation planning is becoming more comprehensive and more responsive to our total transportation needs while balancing other issues, such as the environment and land use; frustrating because of the complexity of the process and because of an apparent lack of resources and answers.

A new era of change for transportation is indeed upon us, and it requires new approaches. The old relationships among federal, state, and local governments; the old process of decision making; the old financing mechanisms; the old management hierarchy—all must be reevaluated in light of the shifting landscape.

Note my use of the word *shifting*. The points of interest on that landscape—technology, geography, the environment, politics, and the economy*—

*These factors were introduced by Stephen Lockwood as “challenges to institutional conventions” in his framing presentation for the policy discussion on *Institutional Arrangements in Transportation: Impacts of Changing Roles*. Lockwood’s article in this issue of *TR News* is a condensation of that presentation and omits some of the points referred to in the present article.

have always been there. But they have shifted dramatically in the last 15 to 20 years.

Take technology, for example. Perhaps ironically, the technological genius of Henry Ford, who produced his first “gasoline buggy” in 1893, put us on the road that brings us here today—104 years later. A pioneer of the assembly line and mass production, a technological advance in its own right, he built the first automobile for a mass market. It can be said that the railroads revolutionized surface transportation, but the automobile put average citizens behind the wheel, and has been driving transportation policy ever since.

Today the revolution in computer and communications technology is transforming the workplace—not only the way work is conducted, but also where it is located. This shift will undoubtedly have a notable impact on both land use and transportation needs. It may encourage or promote further exurban growth patterns, countering contemporary arguments for a new urbanism and the revitalization of urban centers.

The natural environment, as well, has always been a factor in transportation decision making. In the past it was viewed as a barrier to progress that was often simply engineered out of the way. In the last 20 years, however, there has been a notable shift toward protecting the environment and preserving open spaces. Today that sentiment figures prominently in every kind of development project in the form of exhaustive environmental impact statements.

The politics of decision making today has given rise to a new form of “popular” as opposed to “representative” democracy, whereby decisions are made through town meeting processes. To describe

the shift in politics as a move toward the NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) attitude is perhaps an oversimplification, but it captures in one word a sentiment capable of unraveling a plan that has undergone extensive and thorough review and comment. There is an ironic contradiction in the NIMBY sentiment. We have an entitlement mentality: we are free to get into our cars and travel anywhere, and we expect the roads to be there to make that freedom possible. A comment made 35 years ago by Lewis Mumford about our love affair with the car captures this sentiment and is equally applicable today: “Our national flower is the concrete cloverleaf.” But if not in my backyard—or yours—then whose?

Finally, there is an economic challenge implied by the new paradigms in transportation. That is, who pays and how? We have a national transportation trust fund supported by a gas tax that is being used to pay down the national debt while the existing transportation infrastructure deteriorates. As it is, maintenance costs continue to increase, with \$7 out of every \$10 in transportation being spent on operations and repairs.

There are those who refer to the preceding factors not as challenges, but as obstacles to effective transportation planning. Whether these factors can be overcome within the institutional arrangements proposed by Lockwood is the focus of the remainder of this article. After reading his original presentation, I was left with more questions than answers. I believe these questions must be addressed if we are going to design a realistic and workable road map for the future of transportation policy and establish new institutional paradigms that will make implementation of that road map possible.

One important concern I found missing from the presentation is land use policies and their impact on our transportation systems. This concern is vital to the debate on which the articles in this issue are focused. It is also essential to building and maintaining successful transportation infrastructure services into the next century.

There is an institutional disconnect regarding land use policies. The federal and state governments have designed transportation systems, whereas local governments have maintained control of land use. Too often, local land use decisions are made without regard for the impacts on the transportation system. At the same time, we are seeing local revolts against federal and state transportation policy. Further complicating this situation is the increasingly active role communities and private citizens are playing in the development of local land use and transportation policies and projects.

There is a presumption that land use policy is best defined by local government. However, this view ignores the fact that land use and planning are part of, and drive, an economy that extends regionally, nationally, even globally. Moreover, this view fails to recognize that the social, economic, and environmental impacts of local land use policies extend beyond local boundaries. Unlike most local officials, I believe exclusive control of land use by local government is not necessarily the best practice.

There is a lack of connectivity, of intermodalism generally and of mass transit in particular. For example, how many of this nation's airports have convenient mass transit? And with the growth of suburban job centers, how many urban residents have been locked out of those jobs for lack of transportation?

Land use and transportation must be viewed in a larger context. For me, that context begins with a regional focus. Our metropolitan regions, those regional economies, are the backbone of our national economy, and are the locus of the overwhelming majority of the nation's population and wealth. The MPOs and other regional planning bodies provide a framework within which local officials can work with state and federal authorities to bridge the historical gap between transportation and land use policies and practices.

Having presented this institutional paradigm for addressing the challenges before us, I would like to raise some questions about certain points made by Lockwood. First, he describes our surface transportation infrastructure as a “substantially complete network of major facilities.” I must take issue with this statement. Yes, the Interstate highway system is substantially complete, but there are large gaps, particularly in metropolitan America.

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I must also question the premise that future progress in surface transportation infrastructure services is likely to be associated primarily with

efficient operations and management. Can we manage our way out of a deteriorating infrastructure? Can an inadequate system be operated efficiently?

Reliance on managing the existing system is based on the presumption that we lack sufficient resources to build new infrastructure. This approach falls short, however, because it does not address the increasing cost of maintaining the current system. How do we pay for the system's upkeep?

Additionally, the private enterprise model proposed by Lockwood will require revenue resources of one form or another. Nor am I certain that the private-sector model—along the lines of privately held public utilities such as telephone and electricity services—is the right answer. Lockwood sees the private enterprise model as the future; I wonder whether we are resurrecting the past. Perhaps the federal Interstate highway system has been an historical departure, with the federal government assuming control and financing the total cost of a transportation system.

We can argue that private enterprise built the railroads in the last century, so it should be able to operate and maintain our transportation infrastructure into the next century. If this is the direction in which we are moving, should we not first reexamine the mistakes and problems of the past?

We must also ask whether the private enterprise model is realistic and workable. I would wager that the shifting landscape of challenges discussed earlier may still prove to offer significant obstacles. Will the private enterprise model avoid the pitfalls of the current public participation process or the burdens of environmental studies?

The most troubling by-product of the recent past—the federal Interstate era—is the "entitlement" mentality referred to earlier. The costs of building the system were relatively modest and hidden, and most of us assume that our use of the system is free and unlimited. The private enterprise model will challenge that mentality to the extent that it relies on user fees, such as tolls, which will limit access and bring the daily cost of use into sharper focus. An example is the proposed replacement for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge in Virginia. The study committee originally proposed the use of tolls to help fund the replacement. However, the fear of a public outcry over tolls now has every

public official calling for full federal funding for the new structure. I raise this issue despite my own belief that tolls and other user fees are absolutely necessary to achieve better control over *demand*, rather than *supply*, and to reflect more accurately the true cost of use.

We also must ask whether a pay-as-you-go financing mechanism would limit access. Would it result in a greater disenfranchisement of citizens of lower socioeconomic status? If this should happen, would we not need a better mass transit system to serve those denied access to privately built and operated facilities?

In closing, I would note that the MPO and regional planning are relatively recent developments, which somewhat ironically parallel the development of the federal Interstate system. Both are post-World War II institutions. As we move beyond the federal Interstate era, whether to a private-sector or some other model, regional approaches, including the MPO, should be a part of the system.

When state and local governments have created private-public entities to build, manage, or operate systems, these entities have often taken a regional form. For example, the Washington, D.C., area has a regional airport authority and a regional mass transit agency. Perhaps if we do move to a private enterprise model, it, too, should be built with a regional focus, serving our regional economies.

CORRECTION

The name of Steven Ditmeyer, director, Office of Research and Development, Federal Railroad Administration, was inadvertently omitted from the byline for the article "Rail Research Increases Safety and Saves Dollars," which appeared in the May-June 1997 issue of *TR News*. Roy Allen and Steven Ditmeyer are co-authors of the article. We sincerely regret this error.